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Little Wildfire, The Young Prairie Nomad; or, The Idyl of Echo Canyon.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY," "ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "PROSPECT PETE," ETC., ETC.



"IT'S NOTHIN' BUT ME, MY LITTLE LADY," SAID A CLEAR, "SPLINTERED" VOICE FROM THE BUSHES, AND THE NEXT MOMENT A LITTLE, AGILE FORM GLIDED FROM COVER AND CONFRONTED HER.

Little Wildfire,

The Young Prairie Nomad;

OR,

The Idyl of Echo Canyon.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "DASHING DICK," "TIGER TOM,"
"BOY HERCULES," "PROSPECT PETE,"
"LITTLE HURRICANE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LITTLE WILDFIRE AND OLD LIMBER JIM.

BOOM-M-M-M!

It was the roar of a cannon, and as it rolled along the valley the slumbering echoes of the canyons took it up and sent it reverberating and rebounding over the plain.

The deer in the chaparral started with alarm from their covert, and the wary antelope scampered away over the hills in wild affright, for never before had the peaceful quietude of their domain been broken by such a sound.

And a little band of prairie rangers, loitering on the river's bank in the cool shade of a dense grove, started with consternation, for had a peal of thunder burst from a mid-winter sky they could not have been more surprised.

"By heavens! that was the roar of a cannon!"

He who made this declaration was the leader of the rangers—a gallant, dashing youth of two-and-twenty years, answering to the name of Dan Daring, though he was better known on the plains as Daring Dan, the Reckless Ranger. He was the ideal of perfect manhood. He was of medium height. His well-developed, muscular and sinewy form was dressed in a neat-fitting suit made after the style of the border ranger. His hair and mustache were of a light brown, and his eyes, of the same color, were as soft and mild as a maiden's.

Daring Dan's followers numbered some thirty men, most of whom were young fellows like himself, and all of whom had been born on the prairie and reared among its wild excitements and constant dangers. In fact, the bronzed faces of the band, their strong, rugged yet supple forms, their free and easy movements, their rugged but natty-looking dress from hat to boots, their lithe-limbed horses and fine caparisons—all seemed to wear an air of almost reckless abandon—a rollicking, devil-may-care look.

Daring Dan ranged over the plains from Dakota to Texas. He confined himself to no locality. He was a veritable prairie rover—coming and going like the wind—the terror of red-skin and outlaw, the envy of many a military officer, the steadfast friend of the settler, the miner and the ranchman.

The grove in which the party had halted was on the banks of the upper Arkansas, almost within the shadow of the mountains. When they drew rein it was with the belief that they were the only human beings in the vicinity; nor was this belief dispelled until that thunderous boom came rolling down the valley.

"It couldn't have been thunder," averred Jack Thorne, in reply to Daring Dan's observation, "for there isn't a patch of cloud big as my hand."

"Thunder? No, it was a royal old cannon's boom. There it goes again!"

True enough, through the valley the sound again rolled in crashing reverberations.

In a moment the rangers were upon their feet, and, hurrying to the edge of the grove, looked out up the valley.

A mile or two below them the river swept in an abrupt curve around a slight elevation or point of land beyond which all was concealed from view. But up over this point they saw a single cloud of white smoke slowly rising heavenward. They knew it was the smoke from the cannon, and even while their eyes were yet upon it they beheld a horseman come floating up out of the smoke and swept over the ridge at a fearful speed, finally drawing rein in the valley, over a mile away.

"By the eternal stars!" exclaimed Daring Dan, as he brought his field-glass to bear on the horseman, "that is a woman!"

"A woman?" burst from the lips of his followers.

And a woman it was—a young girl of perhaps seventeen—a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked little beauty. She wore a snug-fitting dark riding-skirt, a thin, airy cape reaching to her waist and a jaunty little blue cap from beneath which escaped a wealth of dark hair.

A look of wild excitement was upon her face. She glanced back up the valley and in a tone of despair cried out:

"Oh, heavens! what shall I do?"

She seemed in a bewilderment of terror.

Her horse, a handsome, spirited animal, pricked up his ears and sniffed the air with uneasiness.

For the third time the cannon boomed out.

Glancing back over her shoulder the maiden saw three horsemen riding rapidly toward her. A cry of terror burst from her lips for she saw they were Indians—knew they were deadly foes.

What should she do? To the right was a clump of cottonwood trees and dense shrubbery. She turned and rode toward it, and as she approached it saw a cluster of vines suddenly parted and a strange, impish face peer out upon her.

Involuntarily she drew rein, while her own face became blanched with terror. Her head grew dizzy and her heart grew sick.

"It's nothin' but me, my little lady," said a clear, "splintered" voice from the bushes, and the next moment a lithe, agile form glided from cover and confronted her.

It was the form of a boy whose age was uncertain. He was a little, wiry-looking elf with a sharp, thin face that was half hidden by the long, stringy locks of dark unkempt hair that hung down over his temples and forehead. His eyes were small and black as an Indian's and looked snakish as they darted their flashing glances up into the eyes of the terrified girl. On his head he wore an old coonskin cap from the crown of which the fur had been closely worn off, leaving but a sickly looking border of fur along the lower edge. His breeches and moccasins were made of buckskin. His shirt was of blue flannel.

In addition to the small rifle he held in his hand he carried a revolver and hunting-knife in his belt.

Seeing the girl was spellbound with terror, the little nond-script continued:

"You needn't git skeered at me, gal, fur I wouldn't hurt a hair of your head—I wouldn't hurt a 'skeeter even, 'less it war pumpin' the blood out of me."

"Who are you?" the maiden found power to ask.

"I'm the Johnny-jump-up of these prairies, miss," he replied humorously; "they calls me Little Wildfire, Ferret-Eyes, and Snaky, and every thing, in fact, calklated to ruin Jim Rassals's character. Jist call me Jim, or Wildfire, I don't care a snap which; and if there's any thing that Jim Rassals can do for you just name it. I'm game on waitin' on the gals, and I'm dyin' to show you a specimen of my style."

"Wildfire," said the girl, "my name is Lillian Barnes. I belong to a party of gold-seekers who have been surrounded by a band of Indians down the river!"

"Great 'skeeters! Then that's what that big bangin' means down there?" asked the young nomad.

"Yes, my friends have a howitzer, and it is its roar you have heard, Wildfire."

"Yes, indeed, I did hear it, Miss Lilly; the 'bang' knocked me clear over fust time and shook the curls all outen my raven tresses; it did for a fact!"

"But, Wildfire, I am in danger; even now three mounted Indians are rapidly coming this way. You see I was riding on in advance of the train when I was cut off from my friends. Oh, what shall I do?"

"Trust in God and Jim Rassals," replied the boy. "Here, jist flicker into this grove and I'll show you my style of workin' up red-skins. I will for a holy fact!"

Scarcely aware of what she was doing the girl followed the boy into the grove.

Daring Dan and his men saw her disappear, though, from where they were, they could not see Little Wildfire nor the approaching Indians; but while they stood discussing her movements the three savages suddenly swept into view.

"Indians! by the eternal stars!" cried Daring Dan, "and they are after that girl. Quick, men, to your saddles and away!"

Their horses were already bridled and saddled, and in a minute's time they were all mounted and speeding away over the level plain.

But they had gone but a short distance when they saw the girl emerge from the *mote* and dash away toward the hills, hotly pursued by the red-skins. Her course carried her always directly away from the rangers, and the latter could see that her pursuers were gaining rapidly upon her from the first.

The savages were undeterred by the presence of the rangers. They were mounted upon swift-limbed animals, and seemed, not only sure of their captive, but of their ability to escape their white pursuers.

Thus the pursuit had continued for nearly two miles when suddenly the girl was seen to draw rein and turn, facing the foe.

"Great Heavens!" cried Daring Dan, "what does that woman mean by stopping there?"

"She's frightened out of her senses, captain," decided young Thorne.

One of the savages is several rods ahead of his comrades and as he approaches the girl, all see a cloud of smoke puff from her extended hand. Then they see the savage throw up his arms, reel and totter in his saddle, and finally fall to the earth.

The girl had slain him!

A shout from the lips of the rangers applauds this daring act, and they urge on their animals with a new burst of speed.

With a fierce yell the other savages urge on their horses more determined, by the death of their friend, than ever. They are now riding side by side. They soon come up to the girl and rein in their horses, one on her right and one on her left.

Then again a cloud of smoke is seen to puff from the girl's extended hand, and another savage falls dead while his horse dashes away with affright. But, at the same instant, the third red-skin throws his arm about the fugitive's waist and drags her from her saddle! Then he utters a fierce, defiant war-whoop as he shakes loose his reins and his horse darts away!

But, at the same moment a rifle in a wild-plum thicket a few rods before him rings out and both captor and captive are thrown heavily to the earth.

Then forth from the plum thicket glides the figure of man in the habiliments of a hunter. In his hand he carries a rifle, from the muzzle of which white smoke is still issuing. And a queer looking specimen of humanity he is. He is a person of fifty years—a small yet wiry-looking fellow, with a thin face, covered with short, stubby whiskers, little gray eyes, big mouth and a thin, hooked nose.

To Daring Dan and his followers this eccentric genius was quite well known, and the moment he appeared in sight a ranger yelled out:

"Hurrah! it's Old Limber Jim that put on the finishing touch!"

The old man waved his hand in response, as he hurried on to the assistance of the maiden.

But the rangers were there with him, and formed in a circle about the fallen savage and the girl.

"Cl'ar the track, Darin' Dan'l!" yelled the old hunter as he came on; "you're too late to claim any o' the honor o' the reskoo. Old Limber Jim's the gallant Croosader that saved the gal. I'm the hero, captain, so let me in to hear her sweet lips murmur their thanks as all sweet lips do. Say, little one," he asked as he pushed his way into the circle, "are you much hurt? Old Limber James is the tulip that put in that last settler, and that's me—here to command!"

The fugitive sprung to her feet and exclaimed:

"Hurt? great 'skeeters! I'm nighly bu'sted—broke all up; but I say, gentlemen, didn't I foolish them Injuns glorifactionly?"

"Shades o' the Aztecs!" burst in derision from Old Jim's lips.

The rangers uttered an exclamation of surprise.

The supposed maiden was no other than the boy, Little Wildfire dressed in Lillian's riding skirt, cap and cape!

The lad burst into a peal of rollicking laughter, when he saw the looks of surprise on the faces around him.

"I'm disgusted—feel womicky," growled Old Jim as he watched the boy doff the riding habit which had not only deceived him but the savages also; "folks, what d'y'e call that critter?"

"I say, old handsome," spoke up the boy, his little black eyes sparkling with mischief; "I are a young tallahooper and you can—"

"Whar war ye ketched? Southern Africa?" interrupted Old Jim, manifesting his disappointment and disgust in looks and words of bitter sarcasm.

"Can't say's to that, but I do know I war never catched in a plum-thicket when Ingins war around and gals war to be defended," replied Wildfire facetiously.

"Oh, you little gymnasticuss you!" retorted Old Limber, "I wish that bullet what killed the

redskin 'd karomed and knocked the stuffin' out of you."

"See here," interrupted Daring Dan, "you fellows don't want to get mad over this affair do you?"

"Shades o' the Aztecs!" replied Old Jim, "d'y'e think I'd harm one tag-lock o' his head? No, indeed. Ugly as he is I'll bet he's a royal little blister. Put your fist *there*, Wildfire, for Old Limber James loves you! A boy that can do three Ingins sich a trick is worthy o' my congratulations. Jist keep on and you'll be Old Jim's equal yet—you've got the cut o' the jib, the eye, the nostril and the nerve; but then if I ever catch you playin' gal again, I'll be an epelectic fit to you. It's blasted sneakin' for a feller to have the romantics knocked out o' him in this bloody manner."

"Spects it is," replied the boy, "but you've a chance yit to die in behalf of beauty. Thar's a real, live gal back in yonder chaparral, and she's purty as a speckled bird-egg. You see how it was; I put on her duds here, told her to conceal herself, and then I got on her hoss and then sailed out to draw the Ingins away."

"Well you drawed 'em—drawed 'em like a forty hoss-power mustard poultice, confound your little picter!"

"Then you were in the grove when the girl entered it?" answered Daring Dan.

"Bet I was, captain! And I reckon it's 'bout time I war goin' back to her. Won't you folks ride back and see her?"

"Certainly," replied Daring Dan, "for if her folks are in trouble we may be able to relieve them."

Little Wildfire mounted Lillian's horse, while Old Jim with the assistance of the rangers, caught one of the dead Indians' ponies, and then the whole party galloped back toward the grove.

As they approached it Daring Dan deployed his men on either side to look out for dangers, while he and the boy entered the chaparral.

Not seeing the maiden where he had left her, Little Wildfire shouted aloud her name.

In answer to his call the girl appeared from a clump of dense shrubbery, with a pale, excited face.

"It's all right, Miss Lillian," the boy answered, "our trick worked like greased lightnin' and them three Ingins are off the war-path forever. This is Captain Darin' Dan, Miss Barnes, and he's a boss ranger and Ingincoller."

The young ranger dismounted, and lifting his hat bowed to the maiden who, with a smile of pleasure returned his salutation.

"Wildfire tells me Miss Barnes," Dan said, "that you and your friends are in danger from Indians!"

"Yes, sir, that is only too true. Nor were we expecting it, for our guide has assured us all along that there was no trouble to be apprehended from them. He said there were no Indians within two hundred miles of us, and so we have been somewhat unguarded by this assurance. But this afternoon, while I was riding nearly a mile in advance of our train, a band of the reds swept suddenly over the hills and scattering out formed a circle around the train an' I was cut off from my friends."

"Really, Miss Barnes, it is singular where those red-skins come from. Your guide was right as to there being none located within many days' ride of here. It must be a marauding band of Cheyennes or Arapahoes from the south. Your friends, I believe, are bound for the gold-hills."

"Yes, sir," Lillian tremulously replied, "but I fear the worst from those savages. Our party is small; there are only ten men. There are also five ladies."

"You have a howitzer, I observe, and that is as good as twenty men; but it will afford me pleasure, Miss Barnes, to become your protector until you can be safely returned to your parents. I have thirty followers, brave and fearless men, who have never known defeat. And here's Little Wildfire whose coup in your behalf worked so admirably: he's equal to a hurricane, if he is a boy."

"Captain," the maiden replied, her lips quivering with the grateful emotions of her young heart, "I am only too glad to accept your professed kindness, for I am sorely in need of good, true and brave protectors at this moment."

These words spoke in earnest by a guileless heart quickened every impulse in the manly breast of Daring Dan, and in his heart of hearts he resolved to prove himself worthy of the confidence reposed in him by the girl.

In answer to a sharp, shrill whistle from the lips of his leader, a ranger entered the grove.

"Hawkeye," ordered Dan, "I wish you would make a reconnaissance of the situation down the river, and report as soon as possible."

Dismounting the scout at once departed on his mission.

"That is Hawkeye Harry," explained Dan as the ranger moved away, "one of the best scouts I ever saw."

In the course of an hour the young scout returned and reported the train as being encamped in a little chaparral, and surrounded by nearly two hundred mounted Cheyenne Indians! He was satisfied that the savages were ignorant of the proximity of Daring Dan's rangers for their attention was wholly turned upon the camp of the gold-seekers. Nor did they seem to manifest the least concern about the three warriors who had gone off in pursuit of the girl.

"Is there any chance of our being able to reach the gold-hunters' camp, Hawkeye?" asked Daring Dan.

"Not without a stiff old fight, for they can see us long before we reach their lines, and can thus bring their entire force against us."

"By 'skeeters!" exclaimed Little Wildfire. "I can fix things, or try it anyhow, so's you can work into the train. If you'll jist watch and hold yourselves in readiness to move, I'll make a gap in that Indian circle so's you can fling yerselves right through in a twinkie. I'll contrive some way to draw them aside if it costs me these raven ringlets."

So saying, the boy at once took his departure. As he emerged from the chaparral into the open plain or valley, he crouched low in the rank grass and crawled along until he reached the river bank over which he dropped himself, and then like an otter crept noiselessly along under its cover down the stream.

He had traveled nearly two miles in this manner when he came to the mouth of a little creek whose banks were fringed with a dense growth of willows. He knew that a number of savages were, or had been, at least, stationed along this creek. Yet, despite this fact, he turned and made his way into the willows through which he slowly and silently moved up the stream.

In the course of a few minutes the snort of a horse on his left arrested his attention. He knew that a savage must be near. He listened with bated breath. He could hear nothing but the tinkle of bit-rings and the cropping of grass by a horse.

Creeping to the edge of the willows the boy peered through a little opening in the foliage out upon the plain. A fine, clean-limbed horse, bridled and saddled, was grazing within five rods of him, while hard by stood a white man, engaged in conversation with a young war-chief.

The white man was a well-dressed and prepossessing looking fellow, but that he was in league with the savages Wildfire had not the least doubt; and, as the lad stood with his keen eyes riveted upon them the emotions that surged in his young, impulsive breast were manifested by the twitching of the facial muscle and the quick, nervous manner in which he grasped his revolver and cocked it.

There being no other Indians within fifty rods of the two, his course of action was soon decided. Raising his revolver with his right hand, with the left he pushed the willows aside, taking aim at the chief as he did so. But before he could press the trigger—as if actuated by some invisible power, the Indian turned and walked slowly away toward a group of his friends.

A smile of satisfaction passed over the boy's face as he lowered his revolver. He waited until the chief had reached his friends then turned his attention to the renegade. The fellow stood with his eyes bent downward, in a meditative mood.

Suddenly—with the quickness and silence of a serpent—the boy glided from the willows, and even before the horse had detected his presence, had hold of its reins.

With an oath the startled renegade turned upon the boy, drawing his pistol as he did so, but before he could use it his arm fell, shattered by a bullet from Wildfire's weapon.

Then, with a leap like that of a panther, the daring youth planted himself in the outlaw's saddle, and gathering up the reins spoke to the now thoroughly frightened horse.

But, at the same instant, before the horse could take a step, another lithe figure glided from the willows, and with a leap, as if from a spring-board, threw himself across the horse behind the boy, and there, face downward, clung as immovable as though a part of the animal itself!

Wildfire, of course, was cognizant of the unknown's presence behind him, but the horse had become almost unmanageable, and the boy was compelled to give all his strength and attention to it, for his pistol-shot had reached the ears of the red-skins, and a score of them were now in hot pursuit. However, he soon got the animal under control and down to its utmost speed, and as soon as he felt assured that he was beyond immediate danger, he turned his attention to the figure that still lay warped over the horse's croup.

Reaching behind him, Wildfire seized the unknown by the collar and endeavored to dislodge him, but failed. The fellow seemed glued to the horse.

"By the melodious 'skeeters!" exclaimed Wildfire, "I'll loosen yer grip fur ye. I'll boro a hole through—"

"Hold on thar, boy, with that shooter! Dimnation, don't you see it's *me*?" gasped the unknown.

"Old Limber Jim, by the holy 'skeeters!' burst in startled accents from the boy's lips.

CHAPTER II.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

It was Limber Jim, true enough, who had thrown himself across the horse's croup. With the assistance of Wildfire he gained an upright position behind the daring young scout.

"Well, if you don't beat all the old roosters I ever see'd," declared the young nomad.

"Yes, and you, you gol-dashed little Jew, come nigh bein' the death o' me," retorted the old man in the boy's ear, as they sped on like the wind over the prairie; "do you know that I war in the willers, and jist in the act o' shootin' in that renegade and mountin' his hoss, when in popped *your* mug?"

Wildfire burst into a peal of hearty laughter.

"Seems we both had the same notion, Limber Jimmy; strange, ar'n't it?"

"Yes, but let me tell you that if you fool 'round in my way any more, by the shades o' the Aztecs! I'll be wuss nor a dose o' hemlock to you. Twice to-day you've knocked my calculations all to Jericho, and I won't stand it another time. Judas, boy! this hoss's a regular nailer on a run, ar'n't he? Pounds the sod lively, don't he? Glory to Mortezuma! see the red's stringin' out over the prairie arter us! Ar'n't that a splendid sight, boy!—ar'n't it enchantin'?"

"It's this horse, Jim, being able to widen the distance atwixt us and the red-skins is what makes it enchantin'," replied the boy; "if they war gainin' on us it'd look different."

The news of the renegade's misfortune, and Little Wildfire's daring feat, flew like lightning around the circle of red-skins, and soon two-thirds of the entire band were mounted and forging away in pursuit of the boy, screaming like a pack of fiends.

Wildfire headed away toward the west, intending to elude the foe among the hills if they followed him that far.

Meanwhile Daring Dan had been anxiously watching for the promised diversion of the Cheyennes, and the moment he saw the break in the lines he gave the order to advance.

With the fair Lillian at his side the young ranger, followed by his men, swept down to the river, and fording it, dashed away at a furious speed over the intervening ridge for the gold-hunters' camp.

Daring Dan was flattering himself that the way was entirely clear, and that they would reach the desired goal without incurring the least danger, so well had Little Wildfire's ruse worked. But, in this he was sorely disappointed. As they galloped over the ridge they found themselves face to face with twenty or thirty mounted warriors, hurrying up the hill toward them. They were not over thirty rods away; hence it would be impossible to avoid a collision.

Instantly thirty flashing sabers leaped with a clang from their scabbards, and as if actuated by a single impulse the rangers formed in line placing Lillian in the rear of the center. All of which was done in an instant, and without checking their speed.

The Indians were taken entirely by surprise, but never wavering, they uttered a defiant war-whoop and drawing their tomahawks prepared for the conflict.

With a rending crash the two lines came together. There were yells and shouts, ringing blows, the thud of falling bodies. Riderless ponies dashed away over the prairie, the Indians scattered like autumn leaves in the wind and fled in every direction, while the rangers galloped triumphantly on—every man in his saddle seeming to bear a charmed life!

The Indians in pursuit of Little Wildfire heard the yells of the combatants and at once turned back; but they were too late to aid their friends; the rangers had made good their entry to the camp of the gold-hunters.

Amid shouts of joy and murmured prayers of thanks, Lillian was received unharmed, back among her friends. But the besieged had few moments for rejoicing, for the savages, goaded to fury by the artful trick of the pale-face boy, and the death of their friend, at the hands of the rangers, made a general advance as if determined to wreak a bloody revenge.

Again the howitzer, manned by an old artillerist, boomed out in thunderous voice, but the Indians had scattered out so that it was less effective, excepting the terror of its report, than a rifle would have been. Its roar was immediately followed by the crash of forty odd deadly rifles, and soon the plain around the grove was one wild and terrible scene. The infuriated savages, urging on their horses, and screaming like lost souls, horses rushing madly this way and that, either riderless or their riders clinging to them in their death-throes, war-whoops and death groans—rifle-shots and cannon's roar—all conspired to make the conflict one of almost demoniac fury. Never did Indians face death so unflinchingly. With desperate determination they pressed on toward the grove from whose entire circle rifle smoke was bursting in continual clouds, and bullets were coming thick and deadly.

Up to the very edge of the motte the madmen charged, and then, after their greatest danger had passed, when their enemies were within arm's length of them, almost, they turned, and without firing a shot or raising a tomahawk fled in wild confusion, leaving their dead and dying on the field.

Unexpectedly it was a bloodless victory for the whites, and Henry Barnes now embraced the opportunity to speak with Daring Dan and bestow upon him and his gallant men his heartfelt thanks for the service they had rendered him and his in that trying hour. He also introduced Dan to all his friends, among whom was his niece, Helen Barnes. The latter was a young woman of perhaps five-and-twenty. She was pale, slender in person, one in whose sad blue eyes were traces of sorrow, and upon whose face were the indelible lines of mental suffering.

Daring Dan did not claim all the honor of Lillian's rescue and restoration. To Little Wildfire he himself awarded the meed of honor.

And while he was thus speaking in terms of highest praise of Wildfire the youth was congratulating himself on the success of his daring adventure.

As soon as the boy saw that the Indians had given up the pursuit of him, he drew rein, and turning, gazed back at the foe; and as a smile mounted his face and his eyes glowed and sparkled with boyish triumph, he began singing:

"And the 'skeeter kept a-buzzin'—
I'm your cousin, cousin, cousin."

"Heavens, boy!" exclaimed Old Limber Jim, as he sprung to the ground from his seat behind the lad, "I'm beginnin' to think you're a young wizard. I'm done with you, boy, I don't want to stay in your society any longer. You're wuss nor a upas tree, and if ever you git in my way again I'll finger your jugular."

"Oh, git out with your cheap blatherskitin'! You're a fraud," returned Wildfire.

"Youngster!" cried the old man assuming a tragic air and smiting himself on the breast, "look at me! I war once a man of a large family—I married a widder woman with fourteen sons and daughters and that brood deviled the angel all out of me and made me a rantankrous destroyer of youth. To keep from depopulatin' the kentry where I matrimoned, I left—a lock of my hair in the old lady's hand—and come West. And I have registered a vow away up among the stars of the first magnitood that no boy shall ever ag'in tramp on my corns. Do you understand? do you see in me your last sickness? Do you observe that I'm a can of physical dynamite? Do you know that you're in the presence of old destruction, hisself?"

Wildfire burst into a peal of hearty laughter. The boy was really in doubt, however, as to how he should take the eccentric old hunter. There was a serious expression on his bearded face, a firmness in his voice, and yet the twinkling of his little eyes, and the extravagance of his remarks, seemed to reflect a spirit of whimsical humor.

"Well," the boy finally said, "what I want worst now is to git over into them gold-seekers' camp; but I reckon I'll have to wait for night

to cover my movements. I hope we may meet there, Limber Jim, and that you'll not be so plagued grannyish; so good-by, old snap-dragon!"

Gathering up the reins he spoke to the horse and galloped away. Old Limber Jim watched him out of sight, his face aglow with some inward emotion, then he burst into a peal of laughter:

"Confound that younker," he mused; "he's the bravest, darin'est little outfit of nerve and pluck I ever met. Gods! if I had his youth and vim I'd give this world with forty-seven stars of the first magnitood thrown in, long with a long-tailed comet. He's a royal little bus'ter."

CHAPTER III.

FLOATING IN THE RIVER.

THE defense of the gold-hunters' camp was now intrusted to Daring Dan, and, although he felt assured that the Indians would not, in the face of their recent punishment, renew their attack very soon, if at all, he made preparations for the worst that might be expected. Three or four lines of rifle-pits were dug along the edge of the grove, and a little fort for the women was constructed of logs.

The grove extended to the very edge of the river bank, which was some ten feet high and of itself was a good defense against an approach by way of the river, with the single exception that, about midway along the side of the grove, a buffalo trail cut the bank to a level, almost with the water. At this cut, however, a guard was stationed to watch the river and plain beyond.

The day finally drew to a close. Night found the women ensconced in their quarters and double guards posted all around.

The moon soon came up flooding the plain and river with a mellow, dreamy radiance. Objects could be seen nearly a mile away.

Shortly after the guard on duty in the cut in the banks took his position there, he detected an Indian scout reconnoitering the opposite bank. A random shot from his rifle frightened the fellow away, but his presence had admonished the besieged to unrelaxing vigilance.

About ten o'clock the guard in the pass was relieved by Daring Dan himself. The young rangers could not forego the conviction that the enemy contemplated an attack from the river side. Rifle in hand he took his position in the cut under the overshadowing bank.

All was quiet as the grave. Even the moonlit waters at his feet were undisturbed by a ripple. It was a quietude that to the experienced plainsman boded no good, and so Daring Dan taxed eye and ear to their utmost power.

Finally, to his relief, a night-bird went skimming along the surface of the river with a wild, impish scream, the crickets in the grove began their dreary chirruping and the tree-frogs their doleful piping.

The moon looked dreamily from the blue sky—the stars twinkled languid and dull.

The midnight hour was approaching. The corporal of the guard was making his round with the relief, when suddenly a lightplash fell upon the ear of Daring Dan.

Quickly the young ranger runs his eyes over the water. He sees faint ripples chasing each other outward from a common center which is not over ten feet from where he stands. With contracted brows he bends forward and gazes down at the water. He starts. He sees what at first appeared to be the reflection of a human face, but a second glance assures him that it is no reflection, but an absolute reality—a human face floating in the river. The body, if there be one, is submerged. He can see nothing but the face—the bearded face of a white man. It has a familiar look, yet Dan cannot recall the time nor place he has seen it before.

The young ranger bites his lips in reflection. The soft tread of feet falls upon his ears. The sound approaches from behind. It is made by a man coming to relieve Dan of his watch.

"Sh!" cautions the ranger, as the man approaches through the shadows of the cut, then he points to the face in the water and says, "look!"

"Ah, me!" whispers the relief. "it is the face of that old scout, Limber Jim whom—"

"So be it," replies Dan, grasping his friend's arm, "poor old fellow! the Indians have killed—"

"Whist, Dan!" interrupted the relief, "see! there is another floating face!"

Daring Dan saw the face even before he spoke. It was drifting down with the current on the moonlit water.

In breathless suspense the two men watch it. They see it drift alongside that of Old Limber Jim. As the tiny waves circling out from each face meet and recoil with a rippling sound, they see both faces move—turn quickly toward each other as if startled.

"By heavens!" whispers Dan, excitedly, "both are living beings!"

Scarcely had the last word been uttered when the hand and arm of Limber Jim was raised quickly out of the water. In the fingers was grasped a knife whose long, bright blade flashed in the moonlight.

Only for the fraction of a moment was the weapon held aloft. With a side stroke the upraised arm descended striking the water with a sharpplash. The knife had been aimed at the face of the unknown, but when it descended that face was gone, and the force with which the blow was struck whirled the old scout completely over in the water and flung the knife from his hand.

Before he could fully recover himself Old Jim felt cold clammy fingers clutching at his throat.

Quick as a flash the old fellow was upon his feet in the water to his arm-pits and clutching by the throat, at arm's length, the unknown foe who already had his digits fast upon his—the scout's—windpipe.

For a moment the two antagonists stood glaring into each other's face, wheezing like air-pumps.

In this position they seemed to recognize each other.

"Little Wildfire!" gasped Old Jim.

"Here!" wheezed the other.

At this juncture a rifle on the opposite shore rung out, a bullet struck the water between the two battle-arrayed scouts and glancing off was buried in the bank.

Quickly Old Jim and Little Wildfire were brought to their senses and releasing their hold on each other hastily floundered ashore.

Daring Dan and his friend could no longer repress an outburst of laughter.

Stopping short, Old Jim exclaimed:

"Folks, did you see the maneuvers of this gashed boy?"

"Yes, we saw it all," replied Dan, "and it was a narrow escape all around, ludicrous as it now seems."

"It's not done with yit," declared Old Jim, savagely, "for I have solemnly resolved to crucify that boy. He dogs my footsteps like a curse. Whenever I have undertaken to make a grand coup to-day, he's found on hand jist in time to claim a share of the honor. Four hours ago, when I found I could not git thro' the enemy's lines, any other way, I concluded to drap myself into the silent river, and under shade of the bank, drift apace the Ingin sentinels and float, face up, down here into camp. I set sail. I drifted along, undergoin' a hundred thousand fears and dangers. Right while I war passin' under the very feet of a sentinel on the bank, a night-hawk dipped down into my face and made a grab at my off eye. Then a cussed bullfrog perched hisself on my forehead and gave vent to a hoarse, rasping croak that rattled my very teeth. Then it was chased off by a great green water-snake, fourteen feet long, if it war a foot, that deliberately crawled across my face so slowly, so cold and slimy that it came mortal nigh givin' me the death-ague. All this, and lots more, I passed thro', and when I'd safely run the blockade, and arriv' here—believin' I'd done somethin' no one else could do, who should hove into port but my evil genius, this boy, Wildfire, disspellin' my dreams of greatness. That's why I'm goin' to crucify him, gentlemen. If I'd only known it war him when I took him for an Ingin, I'd made sure that he wouldn't 'a' bothered—"

"Look here, Jimmy," interposed Little Wildfire with some asperity, "if you think this world's not big enough for both of us to air our great genius in—to cut curlamacues and thingamagigs in—s'posin' we leave it to the bark of a couple of pistols as to who shall git out of the way."

"Bloodthirsty young hyena! d'ye think old James Hupp would fight a sucklin'?"

"Then close your yawps and let me alone."

"Boy, I war once the father of fourteen children—a widow woman's children—and I swear by the mother of Adam that I—"

"A moment, Jim," interrupted Daring Dan; "I am anxious to know something of the dangers that menace us."

"The Ingins are holdin' firm, captain," said Little Wildfire, "and 'bout the time the moon goes down you may expect them, but not before."

"Well, we're fixed to receive them, come when they will."

And so the hours wore on, and as the moon sunk behind the hills every man was aroused and with rifle in hand, stationed at his post.

But to the joy of all, and the contrary expectation of the rangers, the night passed away and the red-skins came not.

Daylight finally revealed them gathered about in little groups upon the plain. On a hillock about a mile away was a party of three, one of whom all could see was a white man.

Henry Barnes brought out his field-glass and through it scanned the three.

"Yes," he finally said, "there are two chiefs and a white man. The renegade has his arm in a sling, and he is rather a fine-looking fellow."

"Let me take a squint at the ole rooster," demanded Little Wildfire, and having glanced at the trio through the glass he continued: "yes, sir, by 'skeeters! that white man's the cappy whose left wing I creased yesterday; and don't you forget it, he is a sprucy-looking rooster!"

Lillian finally came up and took a look at the group, saying, with a shudder:

"Ugh! it brings ugly Indians so close that it frightens me. I can see the feathers in their black hair and the rings in their ears. I can even see their little snakish black eyes. Cousin Helen, do look at them!"

Helen advanced, and adjusting the glass to her eyes glanced at the party. She started with a little cry, and the glass almost fell from her hands, but recovering from the shock, she continued to gaze at the party for several moments. Her friends saw that she was greatly agitated, that she breathed hard; and finally her face turned to the pallor of death; the glass dropped from her hands, and with a wild, distressed moan she sunk unconscious to the earth.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CAMP BY THE LAKE SHORE.

THE scene of our story changes. From the little grove on the Arkansas river we would take the reader to the shores of Twin Lakes—lovely little sheets of water nestled among the mountain hills of Colorado. There we find in camp those whom we have known heretofore; Daring Dan and his rangers, Henry Barnes and his friends, the warlike Old Limber Jim, and last, but not least, the redoubtable Little Wildfire.

The Indians who had given them so much trouble had been driven away by the soldiers who had followed their bloody trail through the Sappa valley of north-western Kansas, where the defenseless homesteaders were massacred and their homes destroyed, and thence over the plains of Colorado to the Arkansas valley.

After the gold-hunters had escaped from the savages, Daring Dan escorted them to the mountain lakes, where we now find them encamped, undetermined as to whether to move on to the mining camp of Leadville, some forty miles distant, or to seek their fortunes in some other mining district. The hills were full of prospectors, and everywhere new lodes were being developed, so fast as to almost confuse the senses of the inexperienced gold-hunters.

But Mr. Barnes's party was not compelled to depend altogether on the fickle goddess, luck. They were content to wait until the mines had been somewhat developed when it would be an easy matter with the means at their command, to purchase paying claims. Moreover, the country was threatened with danger from the Indians, on whose rights it was claimed the miners were trespassing, and so our friends did not wish to place themselves in jeopardy.

The location of the camp was lovely and picturesque, and the days passed there were fraught with romantic pleasures. Little Wildfire and Old Limber Jim, who, by request remained with the party, furnished game in abundance for the table. In fact, the only thing that seemed wanting to complete the pleasure of the party—especially the young folks—was a boat in which to sail the placid, inviting bosom of the lake.

Almost daily prospecting parties called at camp, but they were all strangers, and many of them suspicious-looking characters upon whom Daring Dan and his men kept a close watch.

On the fifth day of their sojourn there, Lillian, who spent much of her time by the lake-shore, descried a boat rounding a point of land half a mile west of camp. It was coming directly toward her, and contained two occupants. She watched it for several minutes, then ran down to camp and informed her father and Daring Dan of her discovery.

The two at once accompanied her back to the lake. The boat by this time had come so close that they could see that it was an Indian canoe, though occupied by a white man and woman.

As Daring Dan stood watching it his eyes lit up with a glow, and a slight flush suffused his handsome face.

"I recognize them now," he at length said; "it is Basil Gray and his sister, Kate."

"And who are they?" asked Mr. Barnes.

"Mountain recluses; there are really three of them, two brothers and a sister, and they have resided over here in a big canyon some three years, defying outlaw and Indian alike with impunity. The one called Noah is a deaf mute. The other—the one coming yonder, is one of the handsomest and noblest-looking youths I ever met, and the sister is truly a lovely girl—a wild little beauty. I am well acquainted with them; in fact, I call often at their cabin, and have spent many a night under their roof. But I will hail them."

As he spoke Daring Dan stepped down to the water's edge, and shouted to them, his voice leaping in musical echoes through the wooded hills.

The maiden recognized him instantly and answered with a wave of her hand.

In a short time the boat reached the shore and the brother and sister landed.

Dan advanced and shook hands with them, and with woman's keen perception Lillian noticed that the maiden permitted her little hand to linger in that of the ranger while she lifted her eyes to his with a look that spoke plainer than words of a feeling in her breast deeper and stronger than mere friendship—a feeling that seemed fully reciprocated by the young ranger.

Henry Barnes and his daughter found that all Dan had said in praise of the brother and sister was true. His form was a perfect type of physical manhood, and upon his clear-cut and handsome face was stamped the index of a noble, courageous and manly character enforced by a remarkable intellectuality.

And as Dan had said, and no doubt believed, Kate was a little fairy. She might have been eighteen years of age judging by the development of her petite yet perfectly molded form, although her face appeared to be that of a girl of perhaps fourteen. Her large brown eyes were shaded with long silken lashes that drooped coyly, and a faint smile, that was indicative of a happy vivacious spirit, played like a tremor of sunshine over her rosy face, and hung quivering on her lips as if ready to burst into rippling laughter. She was dressed in the novel garb of an Indian huntress that was quite becoming to her. Her frock was short, scarcely concealing the knees. Her limbs were incased in handsomely wrought leggings, and her feet in beaded moccasins. On her head was a little cap made of the snow-white plumage of a bird which contrasted prettily with the short dark ringlets that escaped beneath.

Daring Dan introduced the brother and sister to Mr. Barnes and his daughter, then they were conducted to camp and made acquainted with the entire party there.

After awhile Basil Gray and Mr. Barnes seated themselves and entered into a conversation; while Lillian and Kate, girl-like, stole off by themselves and sat down upon a log, and with perfect confidence in each other, talked of everything suggested to their minds. Thus they passed a couple of hours and when their conversation had ended, and they rose to go back to camp it was with a feeling of deep regret they realized that they must part.

When Basil announced his readiness to return Lillian escorted Kate to the boat, Daring Dan walking with Basil.

"Oh, how we have been wishing for a boat these many days," Lillian exclaimed; "it almost makes me sick to look out over this lovely lake and then think that we have no boat."

"I will tell you, Miss Barnes," said Basil Gray, "if you and your father or Daring Dan will accompany us around beyond yonder point of land you may bring the boat back with you and have the use of it while you are here. It will not accommodate more than four or I would invite all three of you to go along."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Gray, for your kind offer," replied Lillian, "though its acceptance depends altogether on what father says and does."

"Indeed," said Henry Barnes, "I know no more about handling a boat than a bear; but if Daring Dan wishes to go with you, I'm sure I have no objections."

"I will go with pleasure," declared the young ranger; and the matter being thus settled the

four took their seats in the boat and were soon adrift on the bosom of the lake.

Basil was an expert with the oar, yet he let the craft creep slowly along that their journey might be prolonged. In the presence of the fair Lillian the young mountaineer beheld what to him seemed his heart's affinity, but his feelings were in no manner obtruded upon her in the attentions he so gallantly paid her. On the other hand Lillian could not help admiring the handsome, manly youth, and bestowed upon him, unconsciously too, looks and smiles that fed the flame that her face had kindled in his breast.

So it was no wonder he dallied with the paddle and heaved a sigh of regret when at last the prow of the boat touched on the beach where they must part. Before leaving their seats, however, Basil and his sister promised to visit the party again in a day or two, when, if her father was willing, Lillian was to go home with them.

With this understanding they parted, Basil and Kate mounting a pair of ponies that they had left hitched to a tree hard by and riding away southward, while Daring Dan turned the canoe and paddled back toward camp. They were rounding the point of land hitherto mentioned when their ears were suddenly greeted by a shout from the shore.

Looking around they saw a man standing on the point waving his hat to them.

"What do you want?" Daring Dan demanded, as he permitted the canoe to come to a stop. "Ar'n't you Daring Dan, the ranger?" the man responded.

"Ay! and you are Old Jack Wines! What in the mystery are you doing there?"

"Pull over and take me on board and I'll tell you."

"All right, Jack," and Dan headed toward the shore.

"Are you sure, Dan, he is not an enemy?" asked Lillian, in an undertone.

"Indeed, I am, Miss Barnes," Dan replied; "Old Jack Wines resides in Denver, and is a noted mountain detective, and is as true and honorable as he is brave and daring."

The canoe soon touched on the beach when the old man leaped into it, and when he had shaken hands with Dan, was introduced to Lillian.

He was a man of doubtful age. He was one of those youthful-looking old men, short and thick-set, with a round roly-poly face as innocent of beard as a boy's of ten, light blue eyes and a nose slightly aquiline. He was dressed in a suit of gray clothes that hung rather loosely and slovenly upon him. He wore a wide-brimmed hat tipped back on his head like a big fat boy with his first hat.

Seating himself the old fellow asked, as the boat swung around and put out into the lake:

"Daniel, been pickin' you up a—a wife?"

Lillian blushed crimson, and Dan himself was not a little confused as he replied:

"No, Jack; did I not tell you this is Miss Lillian Barnes?"

"Oh, yes—excuse—forgot," the old fellow replied, with a chuckle; "but say, Dan, where you goin' to take me?"

"To camp yonder."

"Just so, just so; but Dan, do you know Leadville's gittin' to be a sinful place?—more confounded outlaws, gamblers, thugs and road-people agents mixed up there with the thousands of than ever infested a mining town on this continent. There are so many of them strangers to each other that it's hard workin' up a case."

"Are you on the trail, Jack?" asked Dan.

"Always am," was the laconic reply—"more by and by."

In a few minutes the trio reached the landing near camp. Having beached the boat Old Jack Wines was escorted to camp and introduced to the party, and a pleasant acquisition the old fellow proved himself to be in more ways than one.

By this time the day was well advanced. The sun had already sunk behind the mountain peaks. Supper being served, the stock was cared for, and guards stationed for the night.

Old Jack Wines entertained the party with stories, both humorous and thrilling, of his adventures among the mining camps until the moon came up, when he and Daring Dan rose and walked away together toward the lake.

Coming to where the canoe lay they seated themselves in the craft and pushed off from the shore. They did not use the paddle but permitted the craft to drift slowly out to sea before a gentle breeze.

"Now," said Wines, "that there be no other ears but yours and God's to hear me, I'll tell

"They wrong my brothers! they are innocent of crime!"

"I do not doubt it, Kate, but there are villains who, to conceal their own guilt, will take advantage of your isolation and swear your brothers into the halter of the Vigilants."

"But they could not convince the Vigilants of this," she declared, with decided firmness.

"And why not, pray?" Hamlin quickly asked.

"Because the Vigilants themselves have employed the boys to assist in hunting down the outlaws."

"Indeed?" exclaimed the doctor, with a violent start, "I had not heard of that. Basil never mentioned it to me yesterday."

"Perhaps I did wrong in telling it," said Kate, recovering from her momentary excitement, "but I have confidence in you, doctor."

"Thank you, Kate, thank you," he replied.

A moment's silence followed. Kate walked to the door and peered out into the night.

The doctor stared into vacancy as he drummed lightly on the table with his fingers.

"Kate," he finally said, his whole tone and manner changed, "there is another thing of which I desire to speak, and I hope you'll not feel insulted by it for I must unburden my heart. Since I first became acquainted with you I have learned to love you with all my heart, and I have lived in hopes of my affection being reciprocated."

Kate started slightly, but in a firm, kind voice replied:

"I like all our friends, Mr. Hamlin, but I am too young to think of love."

Dr. Hamlin's face betrayed a painful disappointment. A cloud swept over his contracted brow.

"Then there are no hopes for me," he said, "no likelihood of my love ever being returned!"

"Indeed, doctor," the girl replied in great earnestness, "I do not know what the future may bring forth."

"Well, I shall live in hopes," the doctor responded, "and will continue to insist on your leaving Echo Canyon at an early day for a place of greater security."

As he finished speaking the doctor rose, took up his hat and announced his intention of departing.

Kate invited him to remain until her brothers came home, but he excused himself on the ground that he had a surgical operation to perform that night on a friend with a broken arm, and with no little apparent agitation he bowed himself out of the cabin, mounted his horse and galloped swiftly away.

Kate listened at the door until the clatter of his horse's hoofs died out in the distance, then she returned to her chair by the window.

Five minutes later her brothers came home. She met them at the door with a kiss and words of happy greeting.

With Basil Gray we have met before, dear reader, and his description would answer for his brother Noah, with one exception: Noah was deaf and dumb. In stature, in build, in the color of their hair and eyes there was an exact similarity. They dressed alike, and aside from Noah's being a mute, you could not tell one from the other.

What Noah lacked in the sense of hearing was compensated for in the keenness of vision and the quickness of his mind to read objects and signs. He communicated with his brother and sister through medium of the Mute's Alphabet given with his fingers, and by this means he could carry on a conversation almost as rapidly as with the power of speech.

Having explained the cause of their prolonged absence, the brothers listened to the story of Dr. Hamlin's visit and the object of his coming there that night.

Basil's face became clouded as Kate proceeded. Noah shook his head in a manner that told his feelings were in sympathy with his brother.

"I do not want to go to Leadville," Basil said when Kate had finished her story; "and if I should, sister, your safety will be the only object in going. And yet I dread to take you away from our humble yet happy home into such a place of wickedness and crime. It would be far better that you go to some other place—Denver, for instance; then Noah and I could remain here and defy the villains that would dare attempt to cross our threshold. But I do not exactly understand Dr. Hamlin's actions in coming here to night, his protestation of love for you, Kate, and his hurrying away without waiting our return, even if he had a patient needing his attention—Ah! some one is coming!"

Footsteps sounded near the door, and the next moment four masked men unceremoniously entered the room.

Basil rose to his feet, his face flushed, though he remained perfectly calm and cool. Noah, the mute, glanced nervously from his brother to the intruders.

"Good-evening," said one of the masked men whose clothes were those of miners.

Basil returned the salutation, and was about to address them further, when one of them said:

"You may be somewhat surprised and even annoyed at the abrupt manner in which we enter your house, but then we don't stand on ceremony when we're in a hurry and on business of importance."

"Well, what business have you here with us?" Basil demanded—Kate communicating the conversation to her dumb brother with rapid flashes of her little fingers.

"We have come to notify you that you must leave here and the country within twenty-four hours," replied the masked leader in an insolent tone.

"By what authority do you command this?" asked Basil.

"By the authority vested in us as Vigilants."

"What reasons have you to give for it?"

"Reasons that you fully understand."

"Suppose we do not go?"

"Then we will have to assist you."

A little cry burst from Kate's lips.

Basil's face grew black with the emotions struggling in his breast. He was a brave and fearless youth and would never have controlled his emotions so well but for the presence of his sister whose welfare was uppermost in his mind. His blood leaped in fiery currents through his veins and his first impulse was to settle then and there with the intruders whom he knew to be outlaws and not Vigilants, but he wished to spare Kate the sight of violence and bloodshed. However, he resolved to make no compromise with the villains, and in language that was not to be misunderstood, he replied:

"If you have any thing to settle with us now is the time to do it, for we will not leave here alive if all the outlaws in Christendom demand it!"

"Vigilants," said the leader of the quartette, "you've heard the fellow's defiant reply. We have, therefore, but one course to pursue, and that is to take them into custody at once. Men, advance!"

The masked villains started toward the brothers, but quick as a flash the latter drew their revolvers.

"Stand back! hands off!" cried Basil, and the mute raising his weapon shook his head violently while his eyes blazed with a wild, unearthly light.

"Oh! I pray, gentlemen, you will spare my brothers!" cried Kate in tones of humble appeal.

The outlaws made no reply but drew their weapons.

There was a moment of deep silence.

Then other feet were heard outside the door and two more men in masks entered the room. But still the two brothers stood unmoved. Like images of stone they stood erect and defiant, ready to die in defense of their sister and their home.

The masked villains seemed to hesitate. They were for the moment daunted by the resolute and defiant attitude of the brothers. But more friends coming in encouraged them, and finally one of the villains, seeing Kate place her hand upon the lamp as though she contemplated extinguishing it, advanced toward her saying:

"My little lady, I'll take charge of you."

They were the last words he ever spoke, for quicker than the lightning's flash the mute raised his revolver and sent a bullet through the villain's brain.

The ring of Noah's weapon was followed by a shot from that of Basil, and the outlaws swayed backward as if thunderstruck by the murderous audacity of the brothers. They never dreamed that the two boys would attempt to face such odds, and engage them in a deadly conflict; but their surprise was but a momentary shock, and as the leader recovered his senses, he shouted out to his followers:

"Men, shoot the dogs down!"

Quick as a flash Kate blew out the light. The room was in darkness. There was a movement of feet—the flash and stunning report of revolvers mingled with groans of agony and the dull thud and crash of falling bodies.

CHAPTER VI.
THE WORK OF HUMAN FIENDS.
KATE GRAY blew out the light by the silent

command of her brother Noah, and then with the quickness of a cat she sprung through the open door out into the night, and like a deer sped away into the shadows of the canyon.

Two or three outlaws on guard outside saw her as she darted from the cabin and at once gave chase, firing their revolvers in the air and shouting like demons.

The instant the room of the cabin was wrapt in gloom the Gray brothers changed their position thereby eluding the bullets of the outlaws aimed at them in the dark. The flash of the revolvers enabled the two youths to aim their weapons with some certainty, though every time they fired they quickly moved into another position.

The outlaws soon perceived that they were at the brothers' mercy. Already four of their number were down, and seeing their danger in face of the advantage the defenders possessed in the darkness of the room with which they were acquainted, a retreat was quickly sounded by the brazen-lunged leader of the party, and the next moment they were hurrying from the cabin dragging the lifeless bodies of three of their comrades with them.

As they left the cabin the brothers ceased firing.

There was a momentary silence, then the leader of the outlaws, furious with rage and suffering excruciating pain from a wound on the arm, roared out with all the fury of a demon:

"Men, fire that accursed hovel and let us rout them demon brothers or grill them alive!"

"But the girl, captain, the girl!" cried one of the villains.

"She's out and gone," put in another, "but Burke and Evans are in pursuit."

"Apply the torch!" repeated the leader, "for vengeance will be sweet. If they attempt to open that door which they have closed against us, and to escape, shoot them down like dogs. Hurry, men, while our blood is hot!"

Some wood that lay in front of the cabin and some brush were piled against the side of the house and a lighted match applied. The wood was pine and covered with a gummy exudation that was highly inflammable, and in a few minutes tongues of red flame were licking the walls, which being of dry pine logs, readily ignited.

"Keep a sharp look-out, men," commanded the outlaw chief.

With revolvers in hand the party, now numbering but six men, stood waiting and watching.

The fire rapidly crept up the wall and spread out over the roof.

In a few minutes the cabin was a seething, roaring pyramid of crackling flame.

The light lit up the surrounding with the glare of the mid-day sun—tinging with a weird glow the frowning bluffs and dark, green pines.

The top of a dead pine standing close to the cabin took fire and the red flames darted up into the inky blackness of heaven.

Gradually the heat forced the outlaws back further and further from the building.

Night birds and insects by the thousand swarmed in blind confusion overhead, and wheeling and fluttering fell into the devouring flames.

Still all was silent in the cabin, and silent were the weird and ghoulish-looking figures standing under the trees outside.

"I hope," the outlaw leader finally remarked as the fire eat into the walls, "that we're not to be cheated out of our game—that they've not escaped by a secret passage."

"That's hardly probable, Cap," replied a comrade; "them fellers are just bull-headed enough to roast to death in there rather than be taken alive or shot down like men—heavens! there she goes!"

The roof of the cabin fell in with a crash, and amid the smoke and flame a billion stars shot upward and were then rained back to earth among the pines.

But still there comes no one nor no sound from the cabin.

"They die game," said the outlaw chief.

At length the walls began to give and crumble, and in a few minutes more the whole building went down and the home of the Grays was a mass of red, hissing fire.

"Beaten after all," said an outlaw regrettably.

The villains looked at each other in silent amazement.

Suddenly a cry burst from the lips of one of the party as he points toward the fire. Every eye turns quickly that way, when up out of the bed of glaring coals—Phenix-like—rises a human form wrapped in a steaming, smoking

blanket. It darts out of the fire and the blanket is dropped as it emerges therefrom revealing the form of a man who throws up his hands as if in mute appeal for mercy. His face seemed bursting with internal fire—his eyes are protruding wild and bloodshot from their sockets.

"My God!" cried the outlaw, "it is Dumb Noah, the mute!"

The wretched youth's pantomimic appeal for mercy was followed by a movement of the outlaws toward him; but, as if impelled by a new fear, he turned and bounded away into the shadows of the canyon amid the ringing of pistol-shots and the yells of the disappointed outlaws, who, knowing it was useless to follow in the darkness of the canyon, turned back.

"Well," said the outlaw chief, with an oath, "this is a flat failure all around. The girl—the one wanted most of all—is gone, and may elude our men in this canyon and escape entirely beyond hopes of recovery. One of the men is also out and gone, and the other one—"

As if in answer to what he was about to say, a groan fell upon the villains' ears. And it seemed to come from the depths of that bed of coals.

The outlaws listened and when the groan was repeated, and they were assured from whence it came, they fairly shuddered at the fiendishness of their work. One of the young mountaineers was roasting alive in the cellar of the cabin!

As groan after groan issued from the fire, the blood in the veins of the outlaws almost froze, and when the horrible sounds finally died away they experienced a feeling of relief and advanced closer to the fire.

Little blue jets of flame were bursting out of the livid bed of coals here and there, and from a depression in one end of the red heap where the cellar had been, a ragged column of thick, black smoke was rising heavenward, filling the air with the odor of burning flesh.

At length the outlaws turned away from the ruins of the cabin, took up the bodies of their comrades, and moved slowly off through the darkness down the canyon. They soon came to where the horses were hitched. From their saddles they took three heavy blankets, and spreading them out on the ground laid their lifeless friends thereon and carefully wrapped them up from head to foot. Then leaving them there in the shadows of the trees they walked on a few rods and sat down in a little moonlit opening to cool their burning brows and await the return of Burke and Evans.

They remained there for all of an hour, when growing uneasy and impatient concluded to take their departure.

Going back to their dead, they lifted the bodies, still wrapped in the blankets, and threw them across the saddles on the horses upon which the same bodies had sat but a few hours before in the full vigor of life. With lariats the bodies were securely tied in the saddles, and when this was done the outlaws mounted their horses, crossed the creek and turned back up the canyon leading the animals with the three lifeless men. They passed opposite the ruins of the Gray cabin and rode on northward through the darkness, finally turning into a narrow, black defile which they followed a few miles, and then came to a halt among some stunted pines. Hard by, a little cascade came leaping and roaring down a hillside, and, gliding over a precipice, fell in a sheet of foam in a boiling pool below. Here the question of stopping for the night was discussed. The majority were in favor of encamping, and so all dismounted and tethered their horses out in a little open grass plot. The three dead men were laid side by side on the earth, near the little cascade where they were to be interred in the morning.

A fire was lighted under the pines to dispel the gloom.

Seating themselves around it the outlaws entered into a conversation. Their ill-luck at the cabin, the escape of Kate Gray, and the prolonged absence of Burke and Evans were discussed.

The captain seemed more exercised over the escape of the girl than the loss of his men.

In the course of an hour all but one, who was left on guard, laid down on their blankets to rest. After all the crime they had committed that night they soon made peace with their conscience and fell asleep. They seemed to have little fear of pursuit or danger of any kind. Their deep respirations might have been heard intoned with the steady roar of the little cascade.

Even the guard finally permitted himself to be wooed by the fickle goddess, and leaning

back against a rock he fell into a gentle slumber.

Thus the moments passed. The fire burned low. The three motionless forms that lay wrapped in the silence of death could be faintly seen in the dim light. But as the moments wore on, a casual observer might have seen one of the supposed lifeless forms move. The blanket which enveloped the form and face was carefully parted and a pair of eyes burning with the luster of life peered out over the bivouac and at the prostrate forms of the sleeping outlaws.

What did it mean? Had one of the fallen men returned to life? and if so, why did he maintain such silence? Was he in doubt as to whether he was among friends or foes?

In the course of a minute or two the enveloped figure slightly raised his head and peered over at the sleeping guard as if to assure himself the man was asleep. Then he slowly pushed out his hand and parting the blanket from over the face of the prostrate form at his side, peered down into that face. But at the same instant he quickly withdrew his hand for the second body had suddenly and mysteriously become imbued with life, and a revolver in its hand was thrust into the very face of the first—accompanied by the command—hissed forth like the warning of a serpent:

"Keep still or by the living gods I'll blow your brains out!"

CHAPTER VII.

SCARLET SAUL.

STARTLED with terror by the words that issued from the lips of a supposed dead man, the first form to show signs of life sunk back into deathlike repose; but a few moments later he pushed out his hand in which was clutched a revolver and presenting the muzzle at the face of the other hissed out in a low tone:

"Two can play at this, cuss ye!"

"Hold up there," quickly demanded number two, "you're a devil o' a pretty corpse flirtin' a revolver 'round here in people's faces."

"What do you mean, you pizen thief, by playin' dead?" asked number one.

"Is that any of your business?—don't talk too loud or I'll explore your brains with a bullet, and—"

"Say, ar'n't you Old Limber Jim?"

"Yes, and by snakes! you're Little Wildfire!"

The two revolvers dropped and then two hands were shoved out along the ground and met in a friendly clasp.

"It were Old Jim and Little Wildfire sure enough.

"Wildfire," the old plainsman said, "you young scoundrel, it's an awful wonder I didn't kill you. How came you here? What are you here for, boy?"

"I'm here on the same business you are, I reckon," replied the boy; "when I see'd the light in Echo Canyon I came over to see about it and arrived just in time to see the Grays' cabin go down in flames. From my concealment I watched the masked men in hopes of getting a glimpse at their faces to see if I knew them, but they were careful and my watch was a failure. But after they took up their dead and walked down the canyon I followed them. I saw them lay their dead down and wrap them in blankets and then go a few steps furder and set down in the glade to talk over their work. An idea popped into my head and like a shader I crept to one of the dead men, unwrapped the blanket and dragged the body back into the shaders; then I went back and layin' down rolled myself up head and heels in that blanket determined to come dead man on them until I could find out who they war or until they went to chuck me under the sod. I tell you it war hard to hold still when they throwed me in the saddle and warped me around that horse with my nose and toes almost teching, and I war just about dead when they laid me out here."

"Wal," replied Old Jim, "that explanation 'll do for me—only I didn't know that you war about. The same light and same motives brought us together here as they have a dozen times elsewhere, Wildfire. Sands o' Egypt! I want to git up and destroy them sleepin' devils! Oh, ye gods, boys! a volcaner is b'ilin' in me now, bigger nor—"

"Sh! Jim, look there! what is that?" suddenly interrupted Little Wildfire.

Old Jim turned his head slightly and saw a half-crouching figure come stealthily creeping into the light of the outlaws' bivouac. It was a human figure—that of a man. His head was

bare. His face was beardless yet seemed covered with blood for it was red as fire. His form was clad in an odd-fashioned suit of buckskin. His feet were incased in moccasins. A belt was around his waist and in it were a pair of revolvers and a murderous-looking knife.

With a soft, cat-like tread the red-faced creature crept among the sleeping outlaws. His eyes gleamed like balls of fire. He stole from sleeper to sleeper scrutinizing each face closely.

Finally he reached the motionless form of the captain or leader of the gang; but a look of disappointment overspread his face when he saw that the outlaw's features were concealed behind a mask. He could see nothing of his face but the white forehead along which lay ringlets of dark brown hair.

Taking a small package from his pocket the prowler unrolled a small vial therefrom. Uncorking it he held it so that a drop of its bluish, liquid contents dropped on the outlaw's forehead, then like a deer he bounded noiselessly away into the shadows.

With a cry of pain the outlaw chief sprung to his feet clutching at his brow.

His cry aroused his men.

"Heavens, boys!" he exclaimed, "I have been stung with a centipede or rattlesnake!"

The greatest excitement prevailed. The wound was examined at once.

"It's not been made by either a centipede or rattler, captain," said the man making the examination; "it looks more as if a drop of melted lead had fallen onto yer forehead and tracked across it."

"Oh-ho!" whispered Old Jim, "that scarlet-face has branded the captain—put a mark onto him."

"Bet your cadaver, my fellow stiff," replied Wildfire, "he's bound to know that gentleman hereafter; but I say, Jimmy, hadn't we better be gettin' out of this? We're not enough for all them critters, and besides we are not goin' to find out any more 'bout them than that they are outlaws and are goin' to stay here all night."

"All right, Wildfire," whispered Old Limber, "I'd ruther know who that scarlet-faced chap is, and mebby he could tell us who the outlaws are if they really do form any portion of Leadville's population. Are ye ready?—now—up and away!—easy—silent—graceful, boy!"

Quick as two deers the men sprung to their feet and dashed away. The outlaws saw them but before they could recover from their surprise and consternation both were under cover of the darkness.

The two daring scouts kept together and when, at length they felt they were beyond danger of pursuit they stopped. Before them lay a little moonlit opening, and after a few minutes' conversation they started across it.

The figure of a man suddenly glided from the shadows on the opposite side and confronted them. Both readily recognized him as the mysterious scarlet-face that had visited the outlaws' bivouac.

"Good-evening, strangers," he said in a low, quick and excited tone that was strangely unnatural.

"Howdy!" was Old Jim's response; "you seem to be slippin' 'round to-night, stranger, like warm grease. Who might you be?"

"Scarlet Face, the Sleuth-hound," answered the fellow in that same, unnatural tone.

"Out on a lark, ar'n't ye? Struck a trail, hav'n't ye?"

"Yes, the outlaws are at work. The Grays' cabin is in ruins and God only knows the fate of the brothers and their lovely sister, the Idyl of Echo Canyon."

"We know all 'bout that Scarlet Face, and have been playin' it fine to git the drop on them outlaw demons. But you've beat us, Scarlet—we saw you maneuverin' in camp—awful risk to take."

"Where were you?" asked the man.

"Layin' over on the right, playin' dead robber, havin' ousted a pair o' stiffs and taken their place in the folds o' their winding sheets."

"Did you recognize any of the outlaws?" asked the man.

"Not one of them, but we see'd you put your mark on the captain's forehead."

"Ay!" the man exclaimed, "don't forget that, friends; but I must not remain idle here. Kate Gray is in danger and I have a duty to perform."

"Stranger," said Old Jim, "is the Grays anything more to you than friends?"

"That is enough; I am willing to give my life to save that of the girl, Kate," was the rather evasive reply.

"Well, Scarlet Face, what can we do?—what shall we do?" asked Little Wildfire.

"Is not Daring Dan on the lake yet?"

"Yes."

"Then one of you go and tell him what has happened to-night in Echo Canyon, and tell him to send men here to aid us in destroying those outlaw demons; the other might assist me in my search for Kate Gray."

"I'll go for the rangers," said Little Wildfire.

"Then I'll assist in hunting for the gal," said Old Jim.

Without further words the boy departed for Camp Lillian on the lake shore.

Old Jim now found himself alone with the mysterious Scarlet Face, and as he looked closely into his fierce, contorted face, and his wild, glaring eyes he experienced the feeling of one alone with a madman. There was something decidedly mysterious about him. His quick, nervous movements, his subdued and sullen voice, and his half-crouching figure were suggestive of the hunted tiger.

Old Jim was superstitious, and after looking upon the man a few moments he made up his mind that he was not a very desirable companion, and he was revolving in his mind the question as to how he could elude him without offending, when a footstep sounded near and a man emerged from the darkness of the shrubbery and paused within a few feet of them.

With a low, half-smothered moan Scarlet Face leaped upon the stranger like a tiger. There was a brief, silent scuffle, when the man was borne to the earth. Then followed two or three blows, a moan of anguish, and the wild man arose to his feet, wiped the blade of his knife on the prostrate body of his victim, and replacing the weapon in his girdle, bent his ear and listened. In this attitude he remained for fully a minute then, starting quickly, he turned to Old Limber and said, excitedly:

"They are coming! go—do your duty, old man!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEETING AT DR. HAMLIN'S OFFICE.

It is on the morning following the tragedy in Echo Canyon that we would take the reader to the great mining camp or city of Leadville.

It is still early and but few are astir in the streets of the place.

In his office fronting on one of the main thoroughfares, Dr. Dick Hamlin was lying upon a lounge conversing with a man who had called upon him.

The doctor was sick; or, in other words he was suffering, so he told his friends, from an accident which befall him the night before while on his way home from Echo Canyon. There was a bandage around his head and also around his left arm just below the elbow.

The doctor's caller was a man of middle age, rather tall and decidedly good looking and was addressed by the doctor as Captain Loring. The few who saw the captain enter the doctor's office so early in the morning supposed it was on professional business for he carried his arm in a sling.

"Why, my dear doctor," the captain exclaimed as he entered the office and saw the doctor in bandages, "what have you been doing to your handsome self?"

"My infernal old horse ran away with me last night and threw me," said the doctor.

"The Dickens, you say! are you badly hurt?"

"I've a bad cut on the forehead and a wounded arm; but these are not the worst, Cap; I've a wounded heart. My visit to the Grays was a flat failure all around."

"The fiends you say!" exclaimed Loring, looking disappointed.

"Yes, the Idyl of Echo Canyon loves no one but her brothers, neither—"

The speaker was here interrupted by a timid knock upon the office door.

"Come in," called out the doctor, but no one entered. Instead the rap was repeated a little louder.

The doctor again bade the party enter. The knocking being repeated Hamlin finally rose and going to the door opened it.

He started back as he did so and almost fell. He clasped his bandaged head while the color faded from his face.

The man before him was one of the Gray brothers whom he took for Basil.

"Heavens, Basil! what brings you here so early?" the doctor exclaimed as he recovered from his shock.

The young man shook his head and touched his lips.

"Ah! I was mistaken," said Hamlin, "it is the mute Noah and not Basil. They resemble

each other so that I could never tell one face from the other."

Dumb Noah was greatly excited. He took a little round piece of slate from his pocket and wrote upon it the words:

"The Vigilants! the Vigilants!"

As soon as he had read it Hamlin seized the slate and pencil and wrote upon it the question:

"What have they done, Noah?"

"They have burned our home, killed brother Basil and the good Lord only knows where poor sister Katie is!" the mute wrote reply.

"When did they do this, Noah?" questioned Hamlin.

"Last night soon after you left our cabin."

"This is awful, Noah," the doctor wrote; "the curse of God should smite every one of that committee. Noah, I have many good friends here and they will stand by me through all dangers, and if you will join us we will never cease hunting till your sister is found and your brother avenged."

After reading this over Noah nodded assent, and as he did so he became excited, his eyes blazing and his whole frame quivering with intense emotion.

Hamlin finally motioned Noah to a seat, then he and Captain Loring walked into an adjoining room and sat down.

"The mute," said the doctor with a sinister smile, "can't hear it is true, but he's got wonderful eyes and they say he can tell what one is saying sometimes by the movement of the lips and we must be careful. He will be a great acquisition as long as he believes as he does for he knows every mountain pass within twenty miles of here as I know this room and we can elude a thousand foes. If we succeed in finding Kate and can then get hold of your bride, captain, it will be well to run them over to Lake Retreat until the excitement is over, then we can decide upon a further course of action."

"Then you have no doubt of the Grays being the Graybills," replied Captain Loring.

"None whatever," answered the doctor with strong emphasis.

"Well then the mute is in for his share, too."

"No," replied Hamlin, "before old Graybill married Martha Jennings he had two children by a former wife—these boys, Basil and Noah. Kate is Martha's only child. You see after they left the Neosho in Kansas they dropped the "bill" from their name and it became simply Gray."

"Exactly, doctor," replied the captain with a smile.

"Now," continued Hamlin, "I regret that violence and bloodshed were necessary and that there must be more. But when love-making fails as has mine with Kate, then there was but one course to pursue. There is, however, one thing about last night's work very mysterious to me. The leader of the Vigilants, you understand, that visited Echo Canyon, met with a peculiar accident. After they had performed their work and started off up the canyon toward the lakes they concluded to halt for the night, and fearing no danger whatever, selected a favorable spot near the Fairy Cascade and went into camp. A guard was posted and all the rest laid down and soon fell asleep. Along in the night, when the efficient guard had fallen asleep too, a drop of vitriol was dropped on the leader's forehead that awoke that worthy with a yell of pain. In a moment the whole party was on foot and it was several minutes before they could collect their senses and comprehend the situation. Who applied the vitriol God only knows, for not a soul could be seen about. And besides, two of their dead comrades, slain at the cabin and carried to the Cascade were found missing from beside their dead friend. Their blankets were there, but wheretho bodies are and who took them away remains a profound mystery. A few minutes after one of the Vigilants was killed by an unknown foe. Whoever that slayer was he has alarmed all Leadville, for every man I have seen this morning knows of the destruction of the Grays' cabin. But, captain, we will meet to-night at the Fairy Cascade and know the result of the work going on and direct all future movements. We must keep the confidence of Dumb Noah, for if he should mistrust us he would prove a bad one. Don't forget—Fairy Cascade by ten o'clock to-night."

So saying the two arose and went back into the room where Dumb Noah sat listlessly gazing around the room, his fingers working nervously at the haft of the sheathed knife hanging to his belt. Taking his slate the doctor wrote upon it the question:

"Noah, do you know where the Fairy Cascade is?"

Noah read it and answered in the affirmative.

"Meet us there at ten o'clock to-night and we will see what can be done."

Again Noah nodded assent as his flushed face twitched and quivered with emotion.

Taking the slate the mute wrote upon it. "Oh! my poor sister!" then holding it up for Hamlin to read, he turned and glided out of the door into the street that was now all hurry and excitement with moving life.

CHAPTER IX.

ADRIFT ON THE LAKE.

TIME at Camp Lillian on the shores of Twin Lakes passed very pleasantly to the young folks, but to their elders, especially Mr. Barnes and the old detective, Jack Wines, there was a feeling of vague uneasiness created by the discovery of that skulking canoe along the shore. Since first observed by Daring Dan and the detective it had been seen twice—once with two occupants and then again with three.

From the fact that the boat kept out of hailing distance and made its appearance only after nightfall, suspicion of its character was created, and so every precaution was taken to guard against its piratical intrusions, and at the same time to capture it if possible.

The party made good use of the boat left them by Basil Gray, and on the evening of the third day after the visit of the brother and sister at the camp, Mr. Barnes, Helen, Lillian and Daring Dan seated themselves in the boat and pushing from shore drifted out into the lake before a strong, steady breeze.

It was not their intention of going far from camp, but ere they were aware of it the wind, rising gradually, was blowing strongly from the south and driving them rapidly away. Daring Dan seeing this, turned the boat, and plying the paddle with all his strength and skill, was making fine headway against the rolling waves, when suddenly the paddle snapped in two and the blade was swept beyond his reach.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Barnes, as he realized their helpless condition; "what will we do?"

"Well, I declare," said Dan, in perplexity, "it looks as though we can do nothing but sit still and drift to the opposite side of this lake, some miles distant, perhaps."

"And like as not into the hands of enemies," declared Mr. Barnes.

Daring Dan tried, with the shaft of his paddle, to stem the tide, but in vain, and all he could do was to keep the prow of the boat to the wind, and this by the hardest exertions, while they drifted rapidly out to sea.

The shore quickly disappeared from view, and the party found themselves adrift on a boundless expanse of water, under the blue, misty sky.

While Dan was busy with the boat, Mr. Barnes kept a sharp watch around them.

Helen and Lillian sat shivering with terror in each other's arms.

Thus for hours they tossed on the rolling waves. Hope had almost vanished from the breasts of all save Daring Dan, when suddenly a cry of joy burst from the lips of Mr. Barnes. A long, black belt of timber appeared before them and he knew they were nearing the shore.

With no little difficulty they finally succeeded in landing. The men then dragged the boat up on the beach, beyond the reach of the waves. Then all sat down to rest and talk over the situation. Now that they were safe, their adventure to Lillian began to take on a romantic aspect; but to her father and Helen it seemed still a serious affair. Daring Dan was still the same cool, calm and courageous fellow—not a word, nor a look betraying the least sign of emotion.

But how were they to get back? Without a paddle they could never cross the water, and to reach camp afoot would be an impossibility.

Daring Dan had hopes of the wind changing. It had been in every quarter within the past ten hours, and he thought that by daylight it would either go down or shift into some quarter favorable to them.

As there was no other alternative but to wait, they resolved to make the best of their situation and at once selected a shelter under a ledge and seated themselves. Here they had passed some two or three hours listening to some pleasant stories from Daring Dan when they were suddenly startled by a deep and sullen boom as if of a cannon.

"By heavens!" exclaimed Henry Barnes, "that was the report of our old howitzer!"

"Yes, our friends have grown impatient over

our prolonged absence from camp, and thinking, perhaps, that we are lost, are firing a signal," replied Daring Dan.

"Oh, I hope it is no worse?" cried Helen.

"It cannot be for any other purpose," Dan continued, "but friends, do you see that red light in the sky off yonder to the right?"

All answered in the affirmative when Dan continued:

"That seems to be about in the vicinity of the Grays' cabin in Echo Canyon, and I am afraid something is wrong over there. I pray the Grays are in no danger—that that light is not from their burning home."

They watched the light closely. It grew redder and redder. The odor of burning pine was wafted across the lake on the wings of the wind. Finally the light began to fade out and in the course of an hour or two it disappeared.

Daring Dan paced the shore uneasily.

At intervals of an hour the howitzer at camp boomed out.

"I wish we could answer it," said Mr. Barnes.

The midnight hour passed. The wind began to go down and finally a dead calm prevailed.

"It's changing," said Dan, and true enough in less than an hour a strong breeze was blowing from the north-west.

Preparations for departure were at once made. With his knife Daring Dan cut a pole some four feet long and to one end of it securely tied some brush making a sort of a broom.

"We have the wind on our quarter now and with this broom-paddle I hope we may be able to sweep back to camp," the young ranger said.

Launching the boat the party at once embarked therein. The wind bore them gradually away from shore and soon they were beyond sight of land. But owing to their inefficient paddle and the quartering wind they were borne to the right and ere they were scarcely aware of it they were close along the west shore of the lake.

"Well, we'll have to hug the shore," said Dan, "but I hope time and patience will eventually bring us into camp."

"What if that pirate craft should be coasting around here and run into us?" said Barnes.

"We'd give them a warm reception," replied Dan.

Thus they moved slowly along. They were approaching the southern extremity of the lake when they were all suddenly startled by a wild, piercing cry.

Daring Dan permitted the boat to come to a stand when all listened.

Again that wild cry pierced through the night, and it was the cry of a female. Of this there was not a doubt.

"By the heavens above!" exclaimed Mr. Barnes, "some one must be in trouble, Dan!"

"Yes, indeed, but who can it be?"

As if in answer to the young ranger there came the wild appeal:

"Help! help! oh, save me!"

"Gods! my friends, I cannot hear that cry and remain idle! I must go to her assistance at once!"

"Hold, Dan! are you sure it is not a decoy?"

"It cannot be, Mr. Barnes—it is genuine," replied the young ranger, driving the canoe ashore within the deep shadows of some overhanging foliage.

As the youth sprung ashore Barnes rose from his seat saying:

"The women will certainly be safe here in these shadows, and I will go with you, Dan."

With a few words of caution to the girls the two men departed in the direction whence those cries of appeal had come. With the deep, dark shadows the women felt perfectly secure and conversed in whispers.

Since that last wild distressed cry for help all had relapsed into perfect silence.

Half an hour had thus passed when Lillian and Helen heard the light dip of a paddle, and felt a succession of tiny waves chafing the side of their boat.

"Lillian," whispered Helen, "I do believe a canoe is approaching."

"Oh! what would we do if they are enemies and we should be discovered?" replied Lillian.

"Sh! Lillian, do not breathe," cautioned her companion; "the boat is creeping along in the shadows and— Oh!"

With a slight crash the prow of the stranger struck their boat tipping it so that they were nearly pitched into the water and forcing a cry from their lips.

"By Judas! what have we found here?" asked a gruff voice in a low tone.

The women could now see the dimmest outlines of a long black canoe that at once swung

alongside of them. In it were four or five shadowy forms.

Lillian and Helen crouched down in their boat trembling with terror, but the moment Lillian felt a hand touch her then rudely grasp her she uttered a piercing scream for help.

"By the great king Peter! we have another gal here—ay! two of them!" declared one of the unknown.

"Must be from the camp over on the point," added another, "and they're not here alone, either."

Quick as a flash two men leaped from the strange boat into that of our friends and pushed it off from shore.

"Help, father! help!" shrieked Lillian in tones of wild despair.

"Pass me a paddle over here, Luke," said one of the outlaws, for such they were, "there's nothin' but a brush-broom in here for a paddle."

The men in the bateau, for such the strange boat was, handed over a paddle from the shore, the bateau following alongside.

In her sudden terror Lillian would have leaped into the water but for the restraining hand of Helen and one of the men. The latter seized her as she rose to her feet and jerking her down in the boat placed his hand over her mouth saying:

"Now if you yell again I'll strangle you."

Out into the lake beyond the reach of friends the two women were carried. When a hundred rods from shore the two boats running alongside came to a stand.

The captives gazed around them. In the big boat were four persons—three men and a female. The latter sat with her head bowed down as if weeping.

The moonlight falling full upon them revealed to Lillian and Helen the rough, bearded faces of the captors.

One of the men looked closely into the faces of the captives then said to his companions:

"Who says fortune's not on our side? We not only got the captain's bride, but the lovely Miss Lillian Barnes."

"Good! good!" exclaimed the others.

The bowed figure in the bateau raised her head. The moon falling full upon her revealed the pretty yet sad and terrified face of the Idyl of Echo Canyon, Kate Gray.

"Oh, Katie!" cried Lillian, "you are in trouble too!"

"Yes, Lillian," replied the girl, "these heartless men have destroyed my home and I fear slain my brother."

A cry that seemed wrung from her very heart escaped Lillian's lips, and she sunk half unconscious in Helen's arms. In this position she lay for full five minutes, then she started up, the hitherto sad, terrified expression of her face changed to one of indignation and scorn.

Turning to her captors her eyes fairly blazing, she said:

"Villains, you shall suffer for this outrage!"

The men laughed at her.

The report of a rifle on the shore rung out through the night, and was immediately followed by the thunderous roar of the howitzer at Camp Lillian.

These sounds, following so close after the girl's warning, startled the outlaws and the boats were at once put in motion.

They headed toward the north, the bateau taking the lead. The captives saw the shore disappear in the misty moonlight as they moved out further and further into the lake. That they were beyond the assistance of friends they had not a doubt, for they knew their friends had no boat with which to follow them.

The bateau being provided with oars was easily propelled and kept several rods in advance of the canoe.

After pursuing a northward course for half a league the boats bore abruptly to the left, and in the course of an hour the shore appeared in sight again.

The moon sinking slowly behind the distant hills sent dark shadows creeping out over the bosom of the lake.

Into this border of shadows the boats finally glided. The bateau was perhaps fifty rods in advance of the canoe when Lillian, whose eyes were bent downward upon the rippling waves that gave out a phosphorescent glow, saw a dark object rise up out of the water alongside the boat. At sight of it she uttered a cry of terror for the dim outlines of the creature seemed to be the head and neck of a monster serpent. But quick as it had appeared it again sank down in the water as if frightened by the maiden's cry.

No one else had seen it for it appeared at Lil-

lian's side, the others being seated ahead of her and facing the boat's course.

"What's wrong, my little chick?" asked the outlaw.

"You are," was the laconic reply given with disdain.

But scarcely had the words fallen from her lips when she again saw that object rise quickly out of the water at the side of the boat—saw it throw out one arm—heard a dull blow that was followed by a scream of agony from the lips of one of the outlaws that chilled the very marrow in the bones of the whole crew.

"Heavens, Carl! what ails you?" asked the man at the paddle.

Carl made no reply, but clutching at his breast he rattled in the throat, then in a convulsive fit he threw himself to one side and fell overboard into the lake. His friend leaned over to grasp him, when he too uttered a groan of agony and fell forward across the boat's gunwale.

Then up out of the water rose that mysterious figure—the silent slayer. It looked over into the boat as if for other victims.

The tongues of the captives were paralyzed. Their eyes became fixed upon the dark unknown as if held there by some horrible fascination.

"Gals." It was a human voice that sounded familiar that greeted their ears, yet they moved nor spoke not.

"Lillain, be you and Helen here?"

As these words fell upon their ears the spell of terror was broken. They recognized the voice. It was that of the boy nomad, Little Wildfire.

"Oh, Wildfire!" cried Lillian, "what a desperate, daring boy you are!"

"Ar'n't I though?" was the facetious reply of the boy, as he swung himself in the boat and coolly dumped the body of the outlaw into the lake. "Didn't I salt them critters down nicely? Had a big swim for it though, you kin jist bet big, but then I can swim like a fish. Gals, I told Mr. Barnes and Darin' Dan' that'd I'd destroy somethin' afore mornin' and—"

"Then you saw father and Dan?" cried Lillian.

"Yes, right away after you got busseled off; but, gals, whar be that t'other boat what's got Miss Kate, the Idyl—"

"There, Wildfire! oh, there, it is, coming back! Oh, Wildfire! they will kill you!"

"Spects they will if they ketch me," coolly replied the boy, as he took up the paddle and sent the boat gliding through the shadows. But the bateau had got within two rods of them fore its return was discovered and the fugitives had not gone far before they saw they would be overtaken.

"Wildfire!" said Helen, "can you not escape from the boat? See! they are gaining rapidly upon us."

"Let 'em come, and by 'skeeters, if they crowd Jim Rassals too close he'll show 'em a specimen of his naval fightin,'" declared the little nomad.

"But, Wildfire, there are three of them!" said Lillian.

The boy made no reply but plied the unwieldy paddle with all his strength. Despite his efforts, however, the bateau gained rapidly upon them. It was not over a rod away, and seeing he could not elude the foe the boy dropped his paddle and rose to his feet.

At the same instant a pistol in the hand of an outlaw rung out, and with a wild scream the brave boy fell backward into the lake and sunk beneath the waves!

CHAPTER X.

THE MEETING AT THE FAIRY CASCADE.

THROUGH the early evening twilight four horsemen were riding leisurely up Echo Canyon conversing in low yet earnest tones.

Two of them were Dr. Dick Hamlin and Captain Loring, and all were on their way to the Fairy Cascade where Dumb Noah had promised, the previous morning, to meet them at ten o'clock that night.

Dr. Dick wore a few patches of court-plaster on his face and Captain Loring still carried his arm in a sling.

As the four approached the spot where once had stood the home of the Grays, the ring of their horses' hoofs seemed to start a hundred hollow, ghostly echoes. With contracted brows the four men watched every bush and lurking shadow as though afraid they were the ambush of a foe.

At length they came in sight of the ruins of the Gray cabin. Even yet a glimmer of heat was rising from the heap of ashes, and as the

four were riding on a past a groan suddenly fell upon their ears.

Reining up they listened. The groan was repeated. It seemed to come from the ashes of the ruins.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Dr. Hamlin, "can it be that some one is still alive under those ruins?"

"Impossible, impossible!" declared Captain Loring.

As if to refute this declaration that groan again fell upon their ears, leaving little doubt as to the source whence it came.

Dismounting the four men hatched their horses and advanced toward the ruins, prompted more by a feeling of curiosity than of humanity. With their feet almost in the ashes they stopped and gazed over the ruins and listened, but not a thing could they see, not a sound could they hear.

"Queer, very queer," said Hamlin, betraying some perplexity of mind; "Sanders, walk around to the opposite side and explore that withered foliage along the base of the cliff."

The man addressed advanced with hesitating footsteps around the ash-heap, and peered in among the foliage; but he saw no one, and was passing on around when suddenly a man stepped from the shadows and confronted him.

Sanders started back for the face of the man and his terrible eyes struck terror to his very soul.

"Who are you?" Sanders gasped as he fumbled at his revolver excitedly.

"Scarlet Face," answered the mysterious man, in a sepulchral voice, then with the yell of a savage he sprung forward and seizing Sanders by the throat buried him to the earth, as though he were an infant.

Dr. Hamlin and his companions rushed to their friend's rescue, but when they reached his side Sanders was dead and the mysterious destroyer gone!

The breasts of the three men were filled with fear and horror, and lifting the body of their friend they hurried back among the shadows of a clump of trees.

"Boys," said Hamlin, in a serious tone, "we're being tracked—perhaps to death. I tell you we must hurry up our work and get away. Judas! I wish that sleuth, Dumb Noah, was here and we'd hunt that murderer down."

The three deposited the body of their friend in a shallow grave, then mounting their horses resumed their journey.

In the course of two hours they arrived at Fairy Cascade and were met there by several friends. Dumb Noah was not there, yet it was an hour until ten o'clock and the party sat down to await his coming.

The shadows lay deep around them. The moon was shining yet the only spot where her beams fell to earth was at the Fairy Cascade.

As the moments wore away one of the men walked over to the cascade for a drink. He removed the cup from a whisky flask and stretched out his hand toward the waterfall to fill it.

At the same instant a figure stepped from the shadows of a rock and confronted him.

It was Scarlet Face, the avenger.

The man started back with a cry and turned to flee, but in a moment that human tiger was upon him. He called for help. His comrades hastened to his assistance, but reached his lifeless form just in time to see the figure of the destroyer disappear in the shadows.

"Great heaven!" cried Hamlin, "what is the meaning of this? who is this bloodthirsty murderer?"

"Perhaps, doctor," said Captain Loring, "it is an avenging angel sent out by—"

"By whom, captain?" interrupted Hamlin with impatience. Before Loring could reply a rifle rung out in the direction whence the murderer had gone.

A dead silence followed the report of the gun.

The dead man was hastily buried, then the party went back to their horses.

"It is Dumb Noah," said Hamlin, and advancing he took the mute's hand and gave it a hearty shake.

Noah and Hamlin at once hastened to the Cascade where in the moonlight they conversed for several minutes through medium of the mute's slate and pencil.

Suddenly a man came running to where they stood, saying:

"Doctor, a messenger has arrived from the lake!"

Hamlin and the mute at once returned to the main party when the former inquired of the messenger:

"What news, Lige, do you bring?"

"Both good and bad," replied the messenger; "we have not only got the Idyl of Echo Canyon, but the Bride and another young lady. They are at Lake Retreat but the friends of the girls are on the alert and I had to run the blockade to get out."

"The thunder you say!" exclaimed Hamlin; "boys, we must be moving at once—but see here, it will never do for this mute, Dumb Noah, to know of the whereabouts of his sister or he'll give us trouble instead of help. In fact, we will have no further use of him as I can see."

"Some one had better volunteer to dismiss him," said Loring, "at the earliest opportunity."

"Leave that to me," added one of the men.

The matter being thus arranged the party at once prepared to depart when the question was asked:

"Where is Dumb Noah?"

No one answered for no one knew. With the silence of a phantom the mute had disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

IN AND OUT OF THE ROBBERS' CAVE.

As Lillian and Helen saw Little Wildfire sink beneath the waves their hearts grew sick with horror and they could scarcely resist the terrible temptation to seek a watery grave with the brave and daring boy who, they felt assured, had gone down in death. But their bodies were paralyzed with terror and they sat trembling upon their seats while the bateau ran alongside of them with its infuriated crew.

"Where are those men, girls?" demanded one of the villains, seizing Lillian by the shoulder.

"In the bottom of the lake—victims of the brave boy whom you just now murdered!"

"For a dollar I'd send you both after him," thundered the villain.

"I wish you would and end our suffering," said Lillian.

"No. I will not; you shall live to atone for the death of those men in more ways than one."

The women were dragged from the canoe into the bateau which at once moved away, the smaller boat being drawn behind by its painter. They moved toward the shore and ran in under an overhanging rock and stopped. One of the men uttered a low whistle and a few moments later a light appeared in a cavern back in the great rock.

As the water extended a rod or two into the cavern, the outlaws ran their bateau in until its prow grated upon the stony bottom.

"Got them, I see!" exclaimed the man with the lantern, as the light fell upon the three captives.

"Yes, but at a fearful cost," replied one of the men with an oath.

The captives were removed from the boat and conducted back into the cavern where an oil lamp lit up the place with a soft, yellow light.

The apartment was large and commodious. The walls were hung with coats, blankets and firearms. All over the room were piles of plunder that bore evidence of the place being the home of road-agents.

There were five men present—all rough, brutal-looking wretches that were mad and infuriated over the death of their comrades on the lake.

The three captives sat clasped in each other's arms shuddering with terror.

"We must send word to Leadville at once," one of the outlaws was finally heard to say; "the doctor must know how things are. Merle, suppose you take that captured canoe and go ashore and away to the camp at once. We won't dare to leave here, tell the doctor, until we can have a good force to cover our retreat. Stop at the rendezvous, at the Fairy Cascade, and maybe you'll find some of our folks there."

Merle at once made preparations for departure and when ready to go, a man with a lantern escorted him to the water; but what must have been their surprise on arriving there to find the small boat gone.

The alarm was given and all at once became excitement and uneasiness. No man could now be induced to venture outside the cavern where he believed sure death was laying in wait for him.

It was already growing light in the east and through fear no messenger was sent out then—the journey being deferred until the following night should it be necessary to go then.

Day dawned clear and pleasant. All was quiet outside, yet no outlaw would dare expose himself beyond the shadows of the cavern, for

he felt assured that the disappearance of the canoe was evidence of the presence of foes.

The day wore slowly away and with the coming of darkness, Merle entered the bateau and moved noiselessly out of the cavern on his mission to Leadville. His friends listening in the cavern heard no demonstrations and assured themselves that he had run the supposed blockade and reached the water in safety.

The captives were allowed the freedom of the cavern for there was no other way of escape except by water, and in the absence of a boat this was impossible.

The place was kept well lighted, and that too without fear of the light being seen, for the cavern opened upward from the water's edge and then turned to the left.

As the hours wore on, the captives sauntered down to the water's edge and seating themselves entered into conversation, while the four remaining outlaws amused themselves with a deck of cards—their boisterous laughter at times ringing through the cavern and grating harshly upon the ears of the captives.

The women could hear the rippling waves outside their dismal prison and the sound filled their breasts with despondency. They had almost given up the coming of friends—all hopes of escape from the power of those evil men—when, in the midst of their silent reflections, they beheld a shadow appear in the mouth of the cavern on the dimly-lighted water. It was moving toward them and as it came nearer they saw it was a canoe.

Clasping each other in a closer embrace they leaned forward and in breathless silence and suspense peered into the boat.

To their surprise and wonder it was empty!

The captives looked at each other in mute astonishment. What did it mean? Was it a phantom canoe propelled by an invisible spirit? If not, from whence did it receive its motive power?

As these questions revolved through the minds of the captives the boat came to a stand with its prow at their very feet. Not a sign of life was yet visible, but as they stood with their eyes fixed upon it they suddenly saw a dark spherical object rise above the bow of the craft followed by the upper portion of a human face in which was set a pair of bright, flashing eyes.

They could scarcely suppress a cry at sight of those burning orbs that seemed riveted upon them with a serpent-like fascination and they were about to retreat back into the cave when they saw a human hand rise alongside that face and beckon to them in a significant manner.

Instantly their fears turned to hope. They quickly turned and glanced behind them, then at the unknown at the opposite end of the boat.

Again they saw the latter beckon to them then point downward into the boat. They readily defined his pantomimic address and seeing no outlaws were near, they quietly stepped into the canoe and seated themselves.

Scarcely had they done so ere the boat began to move slowly and silently outward, and in a few moments they were clear of the cavern's gloomy walls and floating on the open lake in the mellow moonlight.

But who was their rescuer? Had they simply escaped one danger to encounter a still greater?

These were the thoughts that came to their minds now that they had escaped from one danger, and while they were still revolving them in their minds, a bare head suddenly popped up from under the bow of the boat and a familiar voice said:

"Good-evening, gals."

And before the women could reply another head rose up at the opposite end of the boat, and another familiar voice said:

"Bad evenin', ladies—the boy fabricates."

Then a cry burst from the women's lips—a cry of joy—for they saw that the one was Little Wildfire and the other Old Limber Jim, the hunter-scout.

"Oh, Little Wildfire!" cried Lillian, grasping the boy's hand and assisting him into the boat, "we have mourned you as dead—lying in the bottom of this lake!"

"Dead! Jim Rassals dead?" replied the boy, as he stood dripping wet in the boat; "great 'skeeters! the outlaw's not born yet that's to kill me if he'll come 'round in front o' me. But I say, gals, didn't me and Old Limber thers do this up excroosiatin' fine, though?"

"Indeed it was a daring feat, my brave friends, and would have cost you your lives had you been caught; but, Wildfire, have you seen father since last night?"

"Bless you, yes, gal, and he's nighly taken a coninption fit 'bout you. Old Mr. Jim and me's been on the look-out all day and when we see'd that big boat pull out o' the cave we pulled in."

"It was a desperate risk to run, Wildfire," said Helen Barnes.

"Nothin's too desprit for that boy, gals," observed Old Jim, who had scrambled into the boat; "he's the wust case I ever see'd and the more the danger the greater his success. The way he stole this boat outen that cave beats all creation."

"He is undoubtedly a brave boy," said the matter-of-fact Helen.

Little Wildfire appeared not to hear these words of praise but taking up the paddle sent the canoe gliding slowly yet steadily over the placid lake.

They were a long ways from Camp Lillian, but keeping along within the shadows close to the shore they hoped to avert further dangers. But in this they were doomed to disappointment. In rounding a sharp, wooded point they were forced out into the moonlight, and while thus revealed, a long boat filled with men glided from the shadows beyond and running alongside of them grappled their boat.

The click of revolvers convinced them they were enemies. A cry of hopeless despair burst from the women's lips.

One of the outlaws seized Helen by the hand and gazing closely into her face, exclaimed:

"Edith, my wife, do you know me—Randolph Garcelon?"

The man who spoke thus was Captain Loring.

A cry burst from Helen's lips and with a gasp she sunk unconscious in the boat.

"Gods, man, you have killed her." The speaker was Dr. Dick Hamlin, at the sound of whose voice a shudder went to the very soul of Kate Gray.

Scarcely had Hamlin uttered the above words ere Little Wildfire leaped upon Loring like a tiger-cat, and together the two rolled backward into the lake and sunk beneath the waves.

The women screamed and the outlaws burst into a storm of oaths.

In a moment Loring was buoyed to the surface and was seized and lifted into the boat by his men.

"Where's that boy-devil?" asked Hamlin.

"Dead, curse him! in the bottom of the lake," hissed Loring pointing to a score of tell-tale bubbles that rose and burst on the surface of the water where the boy had sunk!

CHAPTER XII.

DEAD!

THE outlaws had not a doubt but that Wildfire was dead, and while Loring was rejoicing over his victory, Old Limber Jim seized the doubly-dyed villain, Dick Hamlin, by the hair of the head and jerked him from the bateau into the lake, falling from the canoe on top of him. Both sunk from view, but the doctor soon reappeared and was rescued from the waves while Old Jim was seen no more.

"I can't say, friends," gasped Hamlin, as he spurted the water from his mouth and mopped his face and eyes, "that my man is dead. The old devil made that dash on me to afford him a better opportunity to escape by diving. Look sharp for him and put a streak of fire through him if he appears in sight anywhere."

The outlaws, as commanded, did look sharp for him, but the old fellow was too much of a beaver to be caught rising to the surface within reach of them, and when he appeared it was fully four rods away in the dark shadows around the point of land.

As the old fellow crawled out upon the bank panting for breath, a subdued voice said close to his ear:

"Shake, Jim Limber!"

"Holy synagogue, boy!" was the old fellow's response.

Little Wildfire and the old man grasped each other's hand.

"I'll swan, Jim," said the daring boy, in a whisper, "if we ain't both still alive and kickin'! Don't it beat you how nice and natural we work together?—Whatever I do, you do—where one goes down, t'other goes down; where one pops up, t'other pops up—dog my cats, if I don't believe we're twins, Jim, born thirty years apart. But, poor gals! I'm afraid the devils have got 'em now, where we can't save them without help. Oh, if we could just git into that cave ahead of them with a few friends, we'd make 'em think they'd struck the wrong place and got into purgatory."

Meanwhile, the outlaws had been trying, with the aid of Lillian and Kate, to revive the uncon-

scious Helen. Dr. Hamlin's skill as a physician was called into use, but every effort seemed unavailing.

"I believe the woman is dying, captain," he finally said, in a low, excited tone to Loring.

"Oh, Helen! my dear friend!" cried Lillian, falling upon her knees and clasping her arms about the prostrate woman's neck; "you must not die! wake up, Helen—speak to me, cousin—Oh, heavens! see, her head falls back!—save her, doctor, save her!"

"Miss Barnes," said Hamlin, feeling her pulse, "I cannot save her—she is beyond earthly help—she is dead!"

A moan of dreadful anguish burst from Lillian's lips.

Then a moment of awful silence prevailed as all gazed down into the sad, pale face of Helen Barnes whose life-chords had been broken by the nervous shock she had sustained.

"Well," Hamlin finally said, "we must not tarry here."

A convulsive sob burst from Lillian's lips and her whole frame shook in an agony of sorrow.

The outlaws laid the lifeless form tenderly in the canoe, folded the white hands over the pulseless breast, and then, covering it with a blanket, sent the boat adrift in the solemn moonlight.

With Lillian and Kate in the bateau the robbers pulled rapidly away toward their cavern retreat despite Lillian's heart-rending appeals to them not to leave the body at the mercy of the waves.

Old Jim and Little Wildfire watched them until they were out of sight; then they rose and moved along the shore, totally ignorant of the death of Helen Barnes, although they had seen the canoe sent adrift.

They had gone scarcely a mile when they were accosted by a strange voice, and before they could answer it a half-crouching figure glided from the shadows and stopped them. It was the mysterious slayer, Scarlet Face.

"Where are the women, friends?" the man quickly asked.

"Yonder, moving away over the lake, in the power of the accursed outlaws," answered Wildfire.

"Is Dr. Hamlin and Captain Loring with them?"

"Yes; biggest ducks in the puddle."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the wild man, "vengeance will be mine—mine, sweet vengeance—harkee!"

Voices were heard in the darkness near, and the next moment six men, with light footsteps, emerged into the moonlight.

A cry of joy burst from Little Wildfire's lips, for he recognized the party as Daring Dan, Henry Barnes, Old Jack Wines, the detective, and three of Dan's rangers.

In as few words as possible Little Wildfire narrated his adventures with the outlaws at the cavern and upon the lake, and as soon as he had concluded, Mr. Barnes said:

"Come, then, men, let us press forward and see if they return to the cavern."

Guided by Wildfire the party at once started off along the lake-shore. Scarlet Face accompanied them, and as they moved rapidly forward he finally plucked Daring Dan aside and in a low tone revealed to him a secret that fairly astounded the young ranger.

In due course of time the party arrived in the vicinity of the cavern. A consultation was held and it was finally decided to send Little Wildfire and Limber Jim to reconnoiter the cavern and ascertain the strength of the foe.

The two fearless scouts at once departed on their dangerous mission, entering the water and swimming along in the deep, dark shadows.

They had been gone but a few minutes when the trample of many hooved feet were heard retreating into the hills. The party in waiting for the scouts could not make out the meaning of it until Wildfire and Jim returned with the intelligence that the cavern was deserted—evidently for good.

Then all knew full well that the outlaws with their captives had taken to the hills, and hope in the breasts of the pursuers gave way to despondency.

CHAPTER XIII.

A THRILLING ADVENTURE.

THREE nights and two days have passed since the outlaws deserted their cabin retreat by the lake and we again find them pursuing a westward course along the Grand Mesa, a hundred miles from Twin Lakes. They are pushing rapidly for the Indian country where with the hostile Utes they expect to find a place of

refuge and safety with their fair captives, Lillian Barnes and Kate Gray.

There are eight men in the party, all well mounted and equipped; but Dr. Dick Hamlin and Captain Loring are not with them. These consummate rascals have no need of going into the Indian country for the men they have intrusted the captives to are true and tried, and they have returned to Leadville to complete their villainous conspiracy against the heirs of the dead Benoni Methias.

The two captives are treated as kindly as it is possible for such men, under the existing circumstances, to treat a woman, though they are very sad and despondent.

From what they had overheard the girls found out the cause of their persecution, and the only wonder was that they were not murdered outright and thus forever removed from the way of those arch plotters, Hamlin and Loring. Their captors did not keep them in ignorance of their destination; but what was to be their fate in the Indian camp they could only surmise.

The outlaws gave them to understand that they could not, under any circumstances, escape. It seemed a great desire to keep the maidens' spirits in a hopeless, despondent condition; but as they journeyed onward brave little Kate noticed some uneasiness among the outlaws, and it gave her grounds for hope and encouragement. She was led to believe that friends were in pursuit and that their proximity had been discovered by the outlaws. She communicated her belief to Lillian, and from that time on both were more cheerful until they were finally met by a band of hostile Utes who were on a scout in search of the adventuresome gold hunters; then all hopes died out of their breasts for they saw that the savages were a bloodthirsty set in good fellowship with the outlaws for they at once turned about and accompanied the outlaws westward.

The presence of the Indians led the captives to infer that they were approaching the Ute village from whence there could be no escape, and so they became resigned to their fate.

At noon they halted on a long stretch of table-land covered with stunted pines. Guards were posted in the rear and upon either side of the party.

The captives were taken from their saddles and seated upon blankets spread on the ground, then all partook of such food as their supplies would afford.

Finally, when ready to resume their journey, the leader of the outlaws, Mark Aultman, told the party to wait until he had ascended a cliff on their right and taken a survey of the surroundings as a precautionary measure against pursuers. He passed around the base of the cliff out of sight of his friends and began the ascent. In a few minutes he had reached the top and in passing across it he was suddenly confronted by a man that sprung suddenly from behind a rock with the look of a demon on his face.

"Scarlet Face!" burst involuntarily from Aultman's lips, and he reached for his revolver, but before he could draw it from his belt the dread avenger leaped upon him and seizing him by the wrist with one hand wrenched his arm until the bones fairly cracked, while with the other he seized the outlaw by the throat preventing him from crying out.

Aultman struggled in horrible pain as his eyes started from their sockets and his tongue protruded from between his lips. The cold perspiration rose in great beads on the villain's brow. Looking him in the eyes with a fiendish glare Scarlet Face hissed out:

"Curses upon you, wretch! you are one of those who destroyed the home of Basil and Noah Gray!"

"Mercy! mercy!" gasped the powerless villain in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes, I will show you mercy at the foot of this cliff!"

As he spoke the enraged avenger swung the outlaw around and hurled him over the cliff.

Those waiting at the foot of the ascent were startled by the cry that came trailing down to their ears followed by the sickening thud of the outlaw's body on the rocks at their feet.

Kneeling by the broken, bleeding form an outlaw saw that life was extinct; and as no shot had been heard nor no sound had preceded his fall, all believed it had been accidental until the livid finger marks of the destroyer were discovered on the throat.

"Go, men, and hunt the devil down that is dogging our footsteps!" commanded an outlaw, and the next moment Indians and robbers were

gliding up the opposite side of the cliff like hungry coyotes.

But the outlaws and half a dozen savages were left with the captives who stood trembling between hope and fear.

Suddenly Lillian, who stood looking toward the west involuntarily uttered a little cry and clasped her hands over her breast with a look of great surprise not unmixed with joy. Down from the thick foliage of a pine she saw a figure drop onto the back of one of the horses hitched there. It was the figure of Little Wildfire who had been concealed in the tree, and the moment he dropped astride of the spirited mustang ridden by one of the outlaws, he put spur and dashed away. Scarcely had he put his horse in motion, however, when a second form glided from behind a rock, leaped upon the back of a horse and dashed away after Wildfire. This was Old Limber Jim.

A yell burst from the lips of the savages.

The outlaws guarding the captives fired at the daring scouts and shouted to their friends on the cliff.

In a few moments half a dozen of the foes were in their saddles in swift pursuit of the two flying scouts.

The fugitives moved away in a south-westerly course. Neither Wildfire nor Old Jim was acquainted with the ground over which they were fleeing at a breakneck speed, and as the country was cut and seamed with deep chasms and bold rocky points the dangers before them were to be looked for and averted as much as those behind.

Old Jim soon came up with Wildfire, exclaiming:

"Here we are ag'in, boy, both up to the same thing!"

"Oh, we're twins, Jim, born thirty years apart; but how them red devils do screech! Seems kind o' goodish—old business-like, to hear the musical murmur of a cooin' red-skin's voice again, don't it? These are a pair o' good bosses, Jim Limber, and I don't wonder that they're hoofin' it arter 'em."

"Oh, yes, Wildfire, it's the bosses they're after, not us—in course it is, and, by the holy synagogue, they're gainin' on us, boy; we've got to peg into it—"

"To the left! to the left!" suddenly broke in Little Wildfire as a yawning chasm appeared before them, and without checking the speed of their animals they bore to the left. The pursuers seemed to know of the presence of the chasm, for already they had turned and were riding hard to get in before the fugitives.

"By 'skeeters!" cried Wildfire, "I'm afraid them purgatorialists are goin' to head us off, Jim."

"It looks that way, Wildfire," replied the old borderman, "and if we git cooped up here, boy, we're done—our goose'll be cooked."

The chasm continued to press them around to the left closer and closer to the Indians. To turn back would be fatal, so that their only hopes lay in the course they were pursuing. But suddenly another chasm appeared a few rods before them coming at a right angle with the one on their right.

"My God, boy!" cried Old Jim, "look-out! there's another rift before us—we're caged! the devils have got us foul!"

"I'll die in the bottom of the abyss afore I'll be killed by a cussed red-skin, Jim," replied the fearless boy, a look of desperate determination settling upon his face; "spur on your horse, Jim, and let's jump the rift or die in the attempt!"

"Bravo, boy!" shouted the old borderman, and settling themselves in the saddles they spurred toward the abyss.

The rift did not appear to be over fifteen feet wide when Wildfire suggested the desperate resort of leaping it to elude the foe, and not until their animals were upon its very brink—not until it was too late to change their desperate determination did they discover that it was twice that width.

The horses shot forward and as they gathered themselves for the leap on the edge of the chasm, Old Jim cried out:

"God help us!"

With a wild bound the horses shot upward and outward over the chasm whose depths were lost in darkness below. A wild cry burst from Old Jim's lips as he saw that his horse could not reach the opposite brink and the next instant horse and rider sunk from view in the awful depths below.

Little Wildfire's animal with its light burden made a clearer bound and barely reached the opposite edge of the chasm with its fore legs—its haunches hanging over the precipice. Des-

perately did the noble beast struggle for life—clinging to the cliff with its fore legs while it dug its hind hoofs into the wall of the chasm starting an avalanche of stone and dirt roaring down into the black gulf beneath, thus digging away its only support and, finally, with a wild moan that was almost human in expression, the edge of the abyss gave way and the animal fell backward and sunk into the depths below. But its gallant young rider did not go down with it, for he was left hanging in mid-air over the gorge clinging to the slender bough of a pine that stood on the edge of the chasm.

Little Wildfire had involuntarily seized this overreaching limb while his horse hung struggling for a footing on the edge of the precipice, and when he felt his horse sink beneath him he knew at once that his life depended alone upon that slender, swaying bough.

The yells of the triumphant foe mingled with unearthly sounds from the bottom of the chasm were ringing in his ears and almost confusing his brain and paralyzing his limbs, but guided by that instinctive love of life that actuates all living creatures when in danger, he swung himself along the limb, hand over hand. At each step, as it were, the bough cracked and threatened to break, but at length the active youth reached the body of the tree and throwing his legs around it slipped to the ground and dodged behind the tree to elude a volley of bullets from the Indians and outlaws' rifles.

It was several moments before the youth could fully realize that he was safe—that he had made one of the most narrow escapes from death of his eventful young life; but as soon as he did, all his old-time courage and daring returned, and whipping out his revolver he began firing at the foe on the opposite side of the chasm.

About this time yells, mingled with the report of firearms, were heard in the direction of the outlaws' noon camp. Little Wildfire knew at once what it meant—that Daring Dan and his men had made an attack upon the foe. The conflict seemed a desperate one, but soon ended when a number of savages and outlaws were seen fleeing in every direction. Even those before the boy whirled their horses and galloping away were seen by him no more.

A shout of triumph rung from Wildfire's lips for he knew that his friends had been victorious, and felt assured that the girls, Lillian and Kate, were safe. But ah! where was Old Jim?—the brave, eccentric old soul that he had learned to love as a father?

The thought sent a pang through his breast. Turning he walked along the edge of the chasm until he found a place where he could descend to the bottom. Picking his way down the acclivity he groped along until he came to the body of the horse he had ridden. A little further on lay the other animal and hard by lay Old Limber Jim *silent in death*.

At sight of him Little Wildfire called his name, but when he answered not—when he saw he was dead, the lad fell upon his knees by the body of his friend and burst into tears.

"Oh, my dear, brave old friend," he sobbed, "we have taken our last ride together!—followed our last trail together. Oh, dear me! what an awful thing death is. Poor Old Jim!—gone, gone, forever! But then he's better off, I know, for he wasn't a bad man, and I know the Lord will care for Jim's soul!"

Thus the boy spent several minutes by the side of his dead friend—until he was aroused from his mourning by a voice calling to him from above. He answered for he recognized the voice as that of Daring Dan.

Going above the lad found his friends with the flush of victory upon their faces, and the first to greet him were Kate Gray and Lillian Barnes whose rescue had been effected by a bold dash of the rangers.

The news of Old Jim's death cast a gloom over every heart. The body of the brave old borderman was brought up from the gorge and carefully and tenderly buried; then the party at once set out for Leadville where another tragedy was to be enacted, and to where we will now go with the reader.

CHAPTER XIV.

JUSTICE.

WHEN Dr. Hamlin and Captain Loring had seen the girls, Lillian and Kate, placed in the care of Mark Aultman and his comrades, with instructions to carry them to the Ute stronghold and there secure them so that there would be no escape, they felt greatly relieved and at once made their way back to Leadville.

A great deal was yet to be done in order that Dr. Hamlin, who was none other than the vil-

lain, Warren Chase Methias, might prove his right and title to Benoni Methias's estate. He had in Captain Loring, who was the villain Randolph Garcelon, a ready and skillful accomplice—the same who had once won the heart of Edith Methias—whom we have known as Helen Barnes, she having changed her name after going to live with her uncle—and after wedding her deserted her in a few weeks; and from that time until the night that Edith fell a corpse at his feet they had never met.

The death of Helen or of Edith Methias was a stroke of fortune that Dick Hamlin had not counted upon. When a point could be made without the crime of murder it was the desire of the villains to do so, but when necessary they had no conscientious scruples about dealing the deadly blow.

In Hamlin's office in Leadville the doctor and Loring were closeted maturing plans for the future. For some reason or other neither of the villains felt any uneasiness of detection in their crimes. They had kept well disguised during their operations and managed their case with consummate skill, as they believed. While absent from camp it was generally supposed they were out prospecting, and the only person they had any reason to fear was Dumb Noah Gray.

What the plans of the villains were for the future the reader will care little, for those plans were never to be consummated.

On the fourth day after their return to Leadville from Twin Lakes the arch-plotters were enjoying their cigars in the doctor's office when a man unknown to them entered.

"Be Dr. Hamlin in?" the stranger asked.

"I am Dr. Hamlin," replied that worthy, eying the stranger closely, "and this gentleman is Captain Loring."

"Captain Loring, eh?" responded the man; "glad to meet you, captain—glad to meet you both. My name is Jackson Wines—I'm a detective, and am here to arrest you—both of you—throw up your hands, gentlemen!"

As he spoke, old Jack whipped out a pair of deathly derringers and covered the two astounded villains. There was a deadly glare in the eyes of the detective, a firmness in his voice and steadiness in his hands that left no doubt of the man's purpose. Hamlin and Loring were both taken at a disadvantage for neither had a pistol within reach, and they knew at a glance that the man before them would brook no delay so they did as commanded and threw up their hands.

"What, sir, do you mean by this?" demanded Hamlin.

"Justice," was the reply of the of the old detective, and at the same moment Daring Dan, the ranger, and Little Wildfire entered the room and assisted old Jack to handcuff the prisoners.

Dr. Hamlin and Captain Loring were at once arraigned for the crime of murder and entering into conspiracy to defraud the heirs of Benoni Methias out of their inheritance. They were charged with the murder of Dumb Noah Gray, and the destruction of the Grays' home; and when they had heard this charge read, the villains became easier for they knew that Dumb Noah was not dead.

The first witness produced was Kate Gray, and when the maiden entered the court-room escorted by Daring Dan, it seemed that Hamlin and Loring would sink through the floor. They knew by her presence that all was lost.

Kate testified that on the night of her brother's death, Dr. Hamlin had called at their cabin in Echo Canyon and that soon after he departed "several masked men claiming to be Vigilants, came to the cabin and notified my brothers that they must leave there at once as they were suspected of being road-agents. They provoked a quarrel, which led to a conflict, during which I escaped into the canyon, leaving my brothers in the cabin. The villains being driven from the house fired the building, and since then I have learned that my mute brother perished in the flames. While a captive in the hands of the outlaws, Dr. Hamlin and Captain Loring were among them directing their movements, and I am sure I recognized their voices among the masked outlaws that came to our cabin."

After Kate had concluded her testimony, the prisoners seemed to breathe easier, and Dr. Hamlin took advantage of a momentary silence to say:

"Your honor, I hope we are not to be hung on circumstantial evidence, such as that girl has given; if you will give us time we will prove our innocence of the murder of Dumb Noah by producing the mute himself. We will also prove that we have had nothing whatever to do with the capture—"

Further words were cut short by a commotion in the room near the door. A man had entered and pushing his way through the crowd confronted the outlaw. At sight of him Hamlin's face brightened and he fairly shouted:

"There, gentlemen! there is Dumb Noah, now, for whose murder we are to be tried!"

A faint attempt at applause was promptly arrested by the judge, when to the astonishment of all, and the horror of the prisoners, the supposed mute said, in a clear ringing voice:

"Sir, I am not Dumb Noah, but his brother, Basil Gray!"

A wild confusion followed this declaration. The prisoners turned white with abject terror, while cries of "Hang them!" "Hang them!" rose from every part of the court-room. But order being restored, Basil Gray continued his evidence, which we give in substance.

"When the outlaws came to our cabin I knew, from what they told sister Kate, that they meant mischief, but I could not imagine why they wanted us out of the way, as we were troubling no one. Noah and I drove them from the cabin and barred the door after a sharp revolver fight, and then the demons set fire to the cabin and endeavored to burn us out. We knew that to rush out into the light of the burning cabin would be to be shot down, and so we sought shelter from the flames in a secret cavern dug under the floor of our home. When the cave was dug it was believed to be fire-proof, but the heat caused the roof to crumble and fall in, when to remain would have been death. We were in total darkness, and before I could make known to my mute brother my intentions of trying to escape, he was overcome with the dust and heat and fell fainting. Seeing I could not save him, I wrapped a heavy blanket around me, leaped up through the great bed of livid coals and made a dash for my life. The thought of imitating my mute brother occurred to me before I left the cavern, and I uttered no word as I ran from the burning ruins, and escaped into the darkness of night.

"Hard by our cabin was another secret cave wherein we kept our provisions, ammunition and other supplies stored. Thither I made my way and at once assumed a disguise and set out to avenge my brother's death and rescue my sister. I dogged the footsteps of the outlaws from the ruins of our home to the Fairy Cascade where they went into camp, and then when all were asleep—even their guard—I stole into camp among the sleepers and examined every face—not every one either for there was one face covered with a mask; but I put my mark upon his forehead—dropped a drop of liquid upon it that burned a hole through the skin, and that mark is still to be seen on the forehead of Dick Hamlin."

Hamlin involuntarily threw up his hand as if to conceal the tell-tale scar, but all had seen it before. After order had been restored, Basil Gray went on:

"The next morning I called at Hamlin's office and personated my dead dumb brother with entire success. Loring was there and I overheard a conversation between them to the effect that they were engaged in a conspiracy against us and others in order to secure some money or legacy to which some of us were heirs. As Dumb Noah I pretended to co-operate with them in bringing the murderers to justice, but as Scarlet Face, the Avenger, I have already squared accounts with many of them and leave the arch-villain of all to the mercy of this court."

Little Wildfire was next put upon the stand, and the evidence he gave was strong against the prisoners. He recounted his adventures the night the cabin of the Grays was burned, and those upon the lake where Hamlin and Loring were both present and active in their villainy. He told of the death of Helen Barnes and the fact that Loring claimed to be her husband.

Old Jack Wines was also placed upon the witness stand. He produced evidence to show that Dick Hamlin's real name was Warren Chase Methias, and that of Loring, Randolph Garcelon, and that they were engaged in a conspiracy to defraud the heirs of Benoni Methias out of their rights. One of those heirs was Helen Barnes, the other the children of one Martha Jennings. He showed to the court that Kate Gray was the child of Martha Jennings who was dead. The real name of the Grays was Graybill. John Graybill had been married twice. By the first wife he had two sons, Basil and Noah; by the second, Martha Jennings, he had a daughter, Kate. The brothers were greatly attached to their sister, and after the death of their parents they moved from

the Neosho river in Kansas and located in Echo Canyon, dropping the "bill" from their name at the time. But the old detective had traced them up, as had the prisoners also, and his appearance on the stage of action was just in the nick of time to prevent the villains from succeeding in their work of crime and fraud.

When they saw there was no escape—that they must suffer the penalties of their crimes at the hands of Judge Lynch they confessed all that had been proven against them and much more besides; but of this the reader cares nothing now.

Hamlin and Loring paid the penalty of their crimes with their lives, as did also several others of their confederates.

By the death of her cousin, Helen Barnes, Lillian succeeded as joint heir with Kate Graybill to the estate of Benoni Methias. The settlement of the whole matter was placed in the hands of Jack Wines who, true to his trust, managed the case so well that the girls were soon possessors of the inheritance that had come so near costing them their lives and happiness, and which had sent so many to untimely graves.

As the reader, perhaps, has surmised, Daring Dan and the Idyl of Echo Canyon were betrothed lovers, and are anxiously looking forward to the day when their vows will be consummated on the altar of wedded bliss. And in all probability there will be a double wedding for there are no more devoted lovers in all the land than handsome Basil Graybill and pretty Lillian Barnes.

The fortunes of all have been cast in one of the loveliest cities of the West, where we leave them happy and contented.

Little Wildfire is still on the plains, ever on the hunt for excitement and adventure—coming and going with the tide—beloved by all who know him—ever welcome at the home of the settler, miner or hunter—fairly worshiped at the home of Henry Barnes for whom he had done so much. Once or twice a year he visits Mr. Barnes and is given a splendid dinner, and upon each occasion the eccentric youth insists upon a chair at the table for Old Limber Jim, his beloved old friend, with whom he dines in spirit if not in fact.

THE END.



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